

Somewhere **B**eautiful

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Chapter 1

I found myself alone with van Gogh. It was almost closing time at the Musée de Orsay. I was staring at a painting of swirling stars bathed in a world of very dark blue. The stars seemed to be reaching right out of the painting, searching for sanity in an insane world, when suddenly I heard the vibration of a double kick drum that sounded like cards being shuffled. It had to be Gene Hoglan, "The Atomic Clock."

I turned around to find the source. Ruth was watching me staring zombie-like at the swirling madness on the wall. She had her headphones on, as she leaned casually against the entranceway of the exhibit, standing there with a slight grin on her face.

I know "Ruth" is usually the name of an old person. I thought about changing her name in the book, but I'm afraid something might get lost that's essential. One small white lie easily leads to another until the picture your trying to paint devolves into meaningless isolated dots.

Anyway, I loved the curvy way she was standing there -- it created a mood; a mood without a known outcome. She was listening to the raucous wall of sound in her headphones so intently it gave me an extra moment to stare at her. Her face seemed beautifully sophisticated, it fit the place we were in. It was a face you'd see walking down a busy street in Paris, walking past you without looking back, or sculpted by Rodin, classic, natural, but with eyes that

sparkled colorfully when they met your gaze, even while leaning against an entranceway, listening. Thinking of something else.

She had on a pair of American jeans that were rolled up to the top of her ankles, with a thin gold ankle bracelet dangling from her right foot. She wore an unbuttoned blue silk shirt over a pink tee-shirt over a yellow undershirt which barely peaked out above the neckline. The layers of pastel colors were reminiscent of a Monet painting from the early nineteen hundreds. She pushed the iPod off of her ears and said, "Hey Mayor."

Now this was amazing really, because even though my real name was Mayor, no one called me that back home. Even my parents called me some nickname unless they were really pissed at me. Everyone else I hung out with either called me "Mayo," which of course is usually an abbreviation for mayonnaise, or just said, "Hi," to avoid trying to figure out what they should call me, which made me feel kind of invisible. In fact, that was a pretty common feeling I had growing up. But not today. Not now.

She took off her headphones. "Closing time," she said. "Let's get out of here."

We had decided to meet on the fourth floor of this most famous museum because we were both vacationing in France, and she loved this place, especially the fourth floor; an entire floor dedicated to impressionism. I thought it was ironic, since obviously "impressionism" is what first dates are all about.

My parents brought me to Paris as a “just before you go to college,” bonding thing. Of course, being a teenager in Paris, I wasn’t seeing too much of them. But then again, by them feeling okay about that, it *was* a bonding thing, for me anyway.

Ruth was in Paris because her parents were living in an apartment near the Eiffel Tower for a month. We all met by chance at a restaurant on her second to last night there, and, well, you know, two American families on vacation, both from California, one with a teenage boy, one with a teenage girl, in a cozy local restaurant where the meal takes about three hours. It seemed like a good time to brush up on our English, which we weren’t hearing much of lately. So we merged our tables together.

There wasn’t much to do but talk in-between courses. I mean, it’s not like the waiter comes over and sings or anything. They’re all pretty stiff. All business. Ruth and I were seated next to each other – which we both knew was planned by the Board of Parents. One glass of wine led to another and suddenly everyone was liking each other. I thought she was going to be very straight and stuck up because she was wearing “out to dinner in Paris with your parents” clothes. I didn’t know how totally cool she was until we started talking about music and politics and school while waiting for the “entrée,” which in France means “appetizer.” We had a lot in common – she liked heavy metal but she wasn’t a total insane freak about it. She liked lots of the ancient heroes too, like Springsteen and The Stones. She honored the roots. I liked that. And politics was like, “*please!*” And school was like, “let’s not go there either.”

But she did tell me she had been accepted to Wesleyan, which was a very good school, so she had a brain. I had been accepted to the University of Berkeley. Our destinies were no longer in our hands, which neither of us were all that happy about. But it was also kind of a secret relief. We didn't need to decide anymore what school to go to. At some point my heart started racing whenever she said something, no matter what it was, and it really wasn't the wine. It was her. She asked me if I wanted to hang out the next day and I was like, "Sure, okay." I thought to myself, maybe she likes me. But then thinking about it later that night, gauging the competition, what choices did she really have? She could have chosen to hang out with some French people and pretend she understood what they were saying, or chosen to hang out with her parents for the millionth day in a row, or hang out with me.

We decided to meet at the Musée de Orsay the following night at closing time, because that was the only time it was free to get in. We both liked things that were free more than our parents did. Spending money gave them some kind of odd peace of mind. They had made the grade as rich consumers, and now they could even leave us some of their winnings, if their estate plan was cunning enough.

Ruth told me to meet her on the fourth floor, and now I knew why - Monet, van Gogh. Renoir, Sisley. Interesting company.

We skipped out of there just as they were locking up, turning only briefly to see the outstretched arms of a small statue by Camille Claudel - it was a bronze woman with a pleading face reaching out to the open hand of a bronze

man, who was being pulled away by his other hand, guided away or stolen away, by some kind of demonic looking angel (it could have been his wife). An entire movie seemed to be unfolding in what was probably the smallest statue in the whole museum. I was a bit stunned, even just walking by it. We had our own unfolding scene tonight. Hopefully it wouldn't end like that.

We started making our way by foot down café filled streets, except neither of us said where we were going, or knew, or cared. Sometimes there's somewhere you want to go, but other times nowhere can be better than somewhere. And this was a perfect time for that. Everyone's allowed to wander in Paris.

Chapter 2

First of all, thanks. You have to really like to read books to get all the way to “Chapter 2” without some kind of mysterious murder happening by now, or some sex scene that involves infidelity, or a depraved act. I respect that you’re willing to suspend judgment and take your time. Most people don’t seem to read books for pleasure anymore. Too many people just read Chapter 1, and then if something weird hasn’t gotten them totally hooked they just read the ending and think they can figure out the rest backwards. They read what they have to – for class or for work, plus maybe they glance quickly at the Internet news once or twice a day to see if someone like Michael Jackson died. They like the martyring and crucifixion to be detailed out with as much gore as possible, with lots of close-up pictures, captioned with as few words as possible. This is how business people and housewives and loafing wannabe guitar players sitting around their apartment in front of a TV get to rebel against all the “information” they were forced to read in school. School still hasn’t changed that much since the days when all those businessmen were kids. It still sucks. They grew up and forgot to do something about it.

Anyway, we all know what they’re trying to do. It’s basically an inoculation that’s force-injected upon the young while their docile innocent parents pretend they don’t remember. We spend our youth having our arms and minds twisted and shaped into a particular cultural way of thinking. And we go with the charade so we can get accepted into college, so we can join the heroic march

toward paying our electric bills and owning a house, so that we can get to feel trapped and bored and go through a mid-life crisis that everyone laughs at and reassuringly whispers, “it’s just a phase,” while they slap our back, until finally we fall back asleep and do some estate planning to make it all seem worthwhile. “At least the kids...” is the beginning of the sentence that makes it all seem worthwhile. We become “Americans!” And the French become French. And the Chinese fall prey into believing they are “Chinese,” and their culture pushes the “Chinese” ad on every open channel. We’re forced to believe there’s an unbridgeable fearful difference between us. (Until or unless we marry each other, and we find out there’s no difference at all. Everyone’s kind of a jerk.) It’s ridiculous, really.

But what’s the alternative? Living completely off the grid, under a tree in the rainforest? Not accepting any culture as one’s own, not using local currency as your personal totem, not getting all hung up trying to create and psychoanalyze some personal identity? Is there really some other way to live? I was looking for “a middle path,” as Buddha would have said if he were in my situation – about to go to college and hanging out with a beautiful girl in Paris.

I rationalized everything, as everyone except Buddha does; I figured I would check out UC Berkeley and see if it had something truly different to offer, something that wasn’t just about living attached to a leash, although I was under no illusion – I was born with the “docile dog” gene along with most people. It’s an easier way to live. But I think that gene mutated when I turned sixteen.

Back to what I was saying, I appreciate that you're an avid reader. Probably also a bit of a dreamer like me, because here you are on Chapter 2, and I can tell you that reading this book will not get you one step closer to getting a high school or college degree. Because they will never have this book be mandatory reading at any school on this planet, unless it's run by my younger sister, who adores me and everything I do for reasons I totally don't understand. I really should be nicer to her.

She turned fifteen last summer. The day before her birthday I overheard her talking to her snotty friend, planning out her party. They were huddled secretly in her slobby all pink poster-filled room across the hallway from mine. The friend was suddenly talking about me, which I at first only heard as a muffled word that sounded like "*Myr*", as I was sock-sliding towards the B-room to pee out half a carton of OJ, which I drank too fast after a sweaty game of basketball. The echoey monologue got louder and I definitely heard my name again, so it made me stop and eavesdrop without feeling guilty, because all of a sudden this was an educational experience – one of self-discovery, rather than just sneaking in an ear full of gossip about who was coming to a fifteen year old girl's birthday party. I was always open for some constructive feedback.

The friend said, "I mean, he's kind of cute but he's mostly a dork. He's always listening to sappy crappy music, like Avril Lavigne, and playing sports and things like that. No tattoos. I love guys with tattoos."

And my sister says, “Nah, he’s okay.”

What a Saint! I told you I really should be nicer to her. Plus, I had really never thought of myself as “kind of cute,” so that was the one thing positive I took from the conversation. I looked in the bathroom mirror and tried to see what “kind of cute” looked like. I smiled. I tried to make a “kind of cute” frown, and a —*just hanging around not trying to make a face*— “kind of cute” face. But all I saw was that after five days of not looking in the mirror, I probably needed a shave. It’s hard for me to remember to shave.

Back to our walk in Paris, the thing that most intrigued me about Ruth that night as we tripped around searching for the perfect café to sit at without having to order anything, was her almost iridescent blue eyes. I know I mentioned them before, but every time she looked at me they really were startling. We walked in an unconscious zigzag pattern towards the Seine. I felt like I was a wild winding river flowing around her solid calm energy. (I also found myself thinking she must be wearing colored contacts. But I found out later, those were her real eyes!)

The other visual thing I liked about her was that her body was thin but not anorexic looking like a leggy model in some women’s magazine. In fact, what I didn’t know at the time was she could eat more than me and drink more than me, and never seemed to care either way. She was confident about herself, comfortable with who she was. So unlike me in those ways since I was in the throes of a mid-life crisis that came about twenty years early.

Imagine the odds of a seventeen and a half year-old boy from LA meeting a seventeen year-old girl from a town near San Francisco by having their parents randomly meet in a restaurant in Paris, and then falling for each other, walking without rhyme or reason towards the Seine one night, with their fingers sometimes brushing across the other's fingers, just by chance of course, causing some electrical charge in each of them but not admitting it to each other. What are the odds?

By the time we got back to her parent's hotel it was about 2 a.m. She had called them on her cell three hours before to tell them we were just walking around discussing school, and they had her number and hadn't called her, so we assumed they were asleep by now. She didn't seem in any rush to go in. We kind of wandered away from the entrance, over to a corner that wasn't lit up, near a small garden of beautiful colored flowers, and I kissed her. She kissed me back, putting her hand around my neck, with her stomach pressed against my stomach, until all my synapses decomposed. I found myself blissfully destroyed, right there, standing in an unlit spot on a Paris sidewalk. I didn't even know the name of the hotel, or the name of the street, or who owned the garden we were standing near. All I knew was that spot would always be somewhere important to me. Because I felt so alive I knew the memory would stay with me always. Even if I ended up getting dementia some day. I hear you always remember the important things even when you're going chronologically insane.

I decided it would be the first place I'd visit again, if I ever got back to Paris someday, to remember what it was

like to feel clear and cleaned out of all the junk that this world tries to stuff into you. It was the very first place I felt like I owned in some way – not legally, by the exchange of money, but because no one could take that purely personal transcendent moment away from me, even if the flowers in the garden died by the time I came back. Even if they built a skyscraper there in place of this four hundred year old building (which they would never do in Paris). But it wouldn't matter.

Ruth texted me the next day to meet her under the Eiffel Tower at 20:00 (eight o'clock that night). I texted back, "Sure." When I told my parents they kind of raised their eyebrows, like, "Really? You're seeing her again?" My sister gave me a smile and a thumbs up. I tried to downplay it and told them it was better than being bored hanging out with them all night in some quiet stuffy restaurant. But they were like, "Okay, uh huh." Overall, my parents are not terrible.

Chapter 3

Summer in Paris is a time of never-ending sunsets. The sun starts to go down around nine, falls below the horizon around ten, but even then, the sky doesn't turn fully black until close to midnight. As I walked from the Toscadero to the Eiffel tower, its criss-crossed iron beams were still bathed in bright sun. I saw her standing there near an entrance waiting for me. She was smiling a full smile, wearing a ruffled beige shirt that she might have bought that day in a Paris shop, with a faded black tee-shirt visible from underneath which she'd definitely had for a while. Her face was as pale as alabaster, from the Anglo-French *albastre*, with twilight eyes. She immediately took my hand and led me away from the crowds lined-up maze-like, waiting for the small red elevator to take them to the top. Soon we found ourselves walking down a quiet street alone.

"I've been thinking about you," she said quite out of the blue, wiping her long ruffly beige sleeve quickly across her forehead.

"Yeah?" I figured this was either going to be something very good, or very bad.

"I decided you're not a dork."

"Yeah? That's what my sister thinks too!"

"Well then, she's got good taste."

I said, “Thanks for the compliment. I’m glad I’ve yanked myself out of the land of dorks all the way up to ‘okay.’”

She laughed. Then she pointed to a very old building— which in Europe means circa 1500’s at least, and we walked towards it. When we came to the entrance we touched the cool rough stone wall and looked up at the darkened windows. No one lived there. I thought to myself, this is when you’re supposed to kiss her, here in the cool darkness of this ancient place. So I didn’t. Because I didn’t want it to seem fake. I didn’t want to feel like I was in a tweeby movie following someone else’s script. But then she said something that made me drop all that because the feeling overwhelmed me. She said, “*Let’s live here!*” She was joking, of course, quoting Bill Murray’s final line in *Groundhog Day*. But it was almost as if she knew that I knew the quote, and that it was one of my favorite movies. I’d seen it twenty times, as would any true *Groundhog Day* fan, repeating the experiences he repeated over and over again, over and over again. She knew I’d seen it; it was as if she knew my taste in things.

Then I kissed her because I really wanted to, I had to. But it didn’t stop there. We started kissing and touching each other everywhere. It was Paris, it was an empty street in a dark corner of antiquity. And we were in a city where no one would have cared anyway. Paris honors lovers.

It was another 2 a.m. night. As we walked back to her hotel the Eiffel tower looked like an illuminated gold space ship from the nineteenth century. It overwhelmed my senses and soaked up all my attention until our next kiss. She was

leaving for home the next day. But she promised to text me from the airport. I believed her.

When I woke up the next morning something felt different.

I'd had girlfriends before, but I had always felt disconnected in some way, unsure about wanting to be considered their "boyfriend." It's such a responsibility having that kind of freakin' albatross around your neck.

So I would let things happen, or out of curiosity I pushed things to happen, but I always felt a bit like an observer, like I was watching a movie of me doing what I was supposed to do. My heart felt like a dark vault trying to find the thing that was supposed to go inside of it. And through no fault of whatever girl I was with, she didn't have that thing that got to me. She didn't know the combination. And I sure as heck didn't know it! But after a while, maybe a few weeks, maybe a few months, I just knew she wasn't supposed to be with me, even if she didn't know. I clearly knew, but most of the time I didn't care that I knew, I hung around anyway. Just because. But now the vault door was wide open, too open, and my heart was out there flying around, roaming free, out of control. It wasn't just that I had found the one thing – love – that was supposed to go in the vault and free me. *Everything was in it!* Good, bad, everyone, *the world*. It was overwhelming, and it was awesome, but it also hurt. And I didn't like the bad part of it, the "missing her" part, and the neediness that came along with it.... She hadn't called from the airport.

I felt a bit sick about that. But I made up reasons why...logical reasons that made me feel better, and then equally logical reasons that made me feel worse.

The logical reasons that made me feel worse won out somehow, and then turned into *illogical* reasons that made me feel totally crazy. I started looking on the Internet to see if any international flights had crashed. Then there was the old, "she has a boyfriend back home" nightmare. Or, maybe she thought about it and realized I actually was a dork. A very huge dork. All of this prevented me from sleeping, which just makes illogical things seem logical, especially just before sunrise.

I started missing that feeling of calm, almost bored, disconnectedness I felt from before I met her. It allowed me to feel nothing. Friends of mine take drugs to feel nothing. "Nothing" is a valuable commodity that is often paid for with shaking and desperate hands, and angry laughter. "Get me back to nothing," scream the life-weary, the love-stricken, and me, sometimes.

Chapter 4

She called me the next day. I was as happy as a sleepless zombie could be. She said she wanted to call me from *Aéroport Paris-Charles de Gaulle*, but she didn't want to talk to me with her parents around. They would definitely have gotten weirded-out since we'd just met.

She didn't think I'd care one way or another about waiting an extra day to hear from her. She had no clue about the effect not calling had on me, *and I sure wasn't going to tell her!* OMG, that would have blown-up everything right then and there.

Back home in LA, everything seemed different. Nothing had changed, of course. We'd only been in Europe about three weeks. But being in Paris (we also went to Dordogne and Venice) — *all these truly beautiful places* — just made LA seem like an overgrown box of gaudy metal and stupid looking cars, all vibrating with dead energy beneath a vaguely orange sky. It was definitely gross here, even though there were always a lot of fun things to do on the weekend.

Also, my friends now seemed a bit clueless. They seemed kind of immature and odd. They were like a characterization of someone they were trying too hard to be like. I felt bad for them because I knew that I had been acting that same way before I left on the trip, before I met her.

I had been lost, just like they were. And I hated life quite a bit, just like they did, because I was bored with

school and parents, and all the stresses that come from thinking about the future, and scared about everything I couldn't control, and feeling pissed off about having to experience all of the above...and then there were all the phony politicians, and the war(s). But I wasn't allowed to actually scream at the teachers or the government. That would have been "acting out." It was the typical junior-senior year angst. What else was new? Except I didn't feel the angst anymore.

Now we were talking, or at least texting each other every night. I was being très cool about it. Not exposing anything intense going on in my head. So she kept calling. Things were looking up. But I guess if you look up too much without blinking you can go blind from looking directly at the sun. I felt like I was falling from a great height with no wings. Icarus, the moron. Hearts without a parachute. The Challenger disaster. My emotions were going insane.

Two weekends after we got home I persuaded my parents to let me fly to San Francisco to see her. I wasn't going to let them stop me. I just needed the money to get there. What I didn't tell them was that Ruthy's parents were going to be out of town visiting her uncle who owned a chateau up in the wine country. She was an only child, so she usually went with them on weekend jaunts like this. But she told them it sounded boring and that she would be happier staying home alone. What she didn't tell them was that I was flying into SFO about two hours after they sipped their first Zinfandel. She was going to be happier staying home alone. So we figured it wasn't exactly a lie.

As the plane reached peak altitude on this, my first solo plane flight ever, I settled back and looked out the window while being serenaded by U2 on my iPod . I felt so adult-like, flying by myself to visit my girlfriend. “It’s a Beautiful Day,” dum de, dum dum, Bono screaming out those words. The sunlight glazed off the triple-layered acrylic window. You could see the micro-scratches absorbing the sun’s rays. I remember seeing a live U2 concert on You Tube – they let a thousand doves out into the sky above the stadium during the last chorus.... None of them crashed to earth. I took comfort in that, since being thirty thousand feet up was kind of spooky when you thought about it. How smart are airplane mechanics anyway? Were there any Harvard graduate airplane mechanics? I was afraid to ask.

It wasn’t all that long ago that I was playing baseball with my father in the field behind my public school. He wanted me to be a good athlete and a good student. Hence, a scholarship. Hence, he saves an insane amount of money. Hence, he retires earlier.

But I think he saw it coming – I was always asking him crazy questions and spending too much time in a semi-catatonic state lying on my bed with headphones on listening to music he hated. I can pinpoint the exact night my dad gave up on me becoming being the equivalent of a white Hank Aaron – I asked him if I could skip going to a night game with him at Dodger Stadium because there was a Mike Doughty concert at El Rey Theater.

The most memorable moment that night for me was not a home run hit by Manny Ramirez, but when some white kid who looked like he was from USC asked Mike Doughty

if he wore the same shirt for every show, because he had seen him three nights in a row in the same shirt. Mike said, "I have three shirts just like this, so I'm diligent in my laundry habits." Just before slamming into a great version of "27 Jennifers," he added with a wink, "Also, I shop at J. Crew. Don't be a hater." The crowd went wild. I hope I get a chance to take Ruthy to see him some day.

The plane began to dip slightly, then it jolted and emitted the low grinding sound of the wheels releasing, and we swooped down into SFO like a big slick bird who'd just spotted a very tasty meal. Maybe that was my projection, as they say in the sequestered rooms of the psychologists' buildings dotting the 'hoods of Westwood. Because it's the way I felt, for sure! My eyes were starving to see her. I was famished from not having her around.

She picked me up in her mom's gray Lexus. So I slipped my Mike Doughty CD in and played the "White Lexus" song:

*Please show me how to live
Please show me how to have a day
I don't wanna wake up now
Why do I have to wake up, anyway?
. . .When your white Lexus comes
around the way
Idling in the long driveway
Try to feel nothing on command
When your white Lexus comes.*

I kept looking at her face as she drove us back to her house in Mill Valley. She looked less exotic now, away from

Paris, without the Eiffel tower looming above her like an enormous halo in the evening sky. She looked less remote and mysterious, more solid. Her clothes were more plain, although still layered. And a gold bracelet jangled from her wrist as she shifted gears out of the airport onto the freeway. That made me feel a bit sick to my stomach because I didn't like thinking of her as some rich girl. Her face was pale and smooth and finely featured. She listened to "White Lexus," but she didn't make a big deal of it. She wasn't some trying-too-hard characterization of a cool girlfriend – the stereotypical valentine I had fallen-in with in the past. Dare I say it, she was more like my sister Darcy in many ways than like some Britney Spears version 2.3.

We crossed the dazzling Golden Gate, red as the inside of a blood orange, with the fog racing in from the sea, getting tangled up in the cables. Then she sped down Highway 101 a few exits. We were on the outskirts of a small town, then passed a Whole Foods with a parking lot too small to handle the crowds, turned up into the hills on a narrow two-lane road just wide enough for one small sports car, and finally pulled into her driveway. Her house was a big wooden three storey barn-like structure with glass windows everywhere, in various shapes and sizes. The house was hidden deep in the woods, private, quiet. We hadn't said much after a brief hello because she kept the music turned up high on our ride and listened to the CD all the way through. That was fine with me. I felt comfortable listening to the sounds and checking out the sights as she drove, not having to make small talk.

When we pulled into the carport she took the keys out with one quick twist and said, "Let's go. Leave your stuff in the car."

She quickly jumped out and began to run. I ran after her to the front door. By the time I got there she had already unlocked it and raced inside. I followed her in, just in time to see her running up the stairs two steps at a time. I was laughing, curious, running up the stairs chasing her shadow. She ran into her room and left the door open. It was filled with candles, and there were actual paintings on the wall, abstracts, rather than posters. There was a bowl of summer fruit on the dresser – peaches, apricots, plums, green grapes. She smiled at me and slowly began to take off her clothes. Her shoes and socks came off first, so I wasn't sure...but then she unbuttoned her shirt. She kissed me and threw my baseball hat off my head and onto the ground. Our bodies embraced and we fell with slow motion gracefulness onto her bed – soon summer came and I dreamed chaotic colored images as I merged into her silk white skin, blinded behind closed eyes, with light as bright as the sunbeams coruscating off the plane window just hours before.

The big light we have in our minds when something is suddenly shockingly frighteningly good was whirring around in me like a lighthouse searchlight, signaling to some lost Captain that land was near. This land, where all things became perfect mindlessness.

When we landed back onto the shore we were out of breath, giddy. Dazed. But we wanted to go out to sea again. We wanted to repeat the experience, of being lost and found and lost and found. For a long time.

Chapter 5

That night we decided to go into San Francisco. She had lots of friends she wanted me to meet, but I was not allowed to meet them this time, of course, because, I wasn't supposed to be here. I was invisible, as usual. But I didn't care *at all* anymore. I felt like a spy. I didn't want to meet anyone, or be around anyone but her. I didn't want anyone to see me but her. So flying around the city in her dad's green Jag seemed like a pretty good compromise as far as being invisible goes. It did cross my mind to wonder what their third car was like. The car they took up North. At first I imagined it must be a Porsche or a Lamborghini, but those kinds of cars were not great choices for long trips for two old people. Parents like comfort. Especially moms. So then I imagined it was probably something like a red Bentley convertible.

Back to reality. We went to a run-down club near 10th Street called, "Dango," and saw – well, mostly just heard, since the lighting was pretty non-existent – a band that sounded like a poor man's version of "Dimmu Borgir" during their "Death Cult Armageddon" phase. We left early to get drunk in a quieter, ever so slightly more romantic setting, not knowing how we were going to get home with both of us so completely liquidated.

She began driving very slowly at our usual 2 a.m. hour of departure, but when we got to Golden Gate Park near 19th Avenue she pulled onto a quiet street, four zigzag turns from the main road.

“I’m too drunk to drive across the bridge right now. I need to sober up first. If I smash up my dad’s car it would be so very very over. Especially with you in it!”

“I so know *dat!*” I slurred, criminal-rap-cool-dude-like. It was a bit over the top, but I was hoping she would realize how blitzed I was and forgive me. Certainly one thing was clear, I was also way too gone to drive.

“I have an idea, not sure it will work, but it’s worth a try....”

“What’s that?”

We had parked in a very upscale neighborhood. The street was empty at this hour, no cars going by, no people anywhere. I wondered how far it would be to walk home from here. I thought that’s what she was thinking.

“Come into the back with me,” she said as she climbed over the seat. I saw her climbing over, brushing her leg up against me. I followed. Once I was sitting next to her the rest was just as natural as could be. Making love in the back seat can be very awkward, in case you haven’t tried it. But it seemed like whenever Ruthy and I were together everything we did just fit perfectly. Everything was in sync. Including the timing. Because just when we returned to the front seat all tucked-in, a police car drove by, stopped about ten feet ahead of us, and began to back-up.

An officer got out of the car and shined his flashlight into the front of the car. Ruth waved and rolled down the window. “Just showing my friend how beautiful the neighborhood is,” she said.

“With your car lights off?” he said.

A real TV detective, he was. He looked too fat to be a cop. Apparently the academy was accepting just about anybody these days. No way he could chase down a fleet-footed robber, or even me, if I were sober enough to run in a straight line. But I guess with stun-guns and all, you don't need cops running under 4.6 in the 40 anymore. They just need good aim.

“I just wanted to be in the moment with my boyfriend here,” she said. “We were just saying goodbye before we go off to college...in a few months.” That didn't sound quite right. She was speaking with perfect diction and respect, but she was beginning to ramble, so she stopped herself from saying more.

“Mmm hmm,” he said. I figured he had to be reading between the lines. Maybe getting a bit horny. Maybe he was a little envious too, of two relatively skinny kids, with him being so rotund and all. And then maybe he starts thinking back to his days at school when all those kids laughed about how fat he was. And he promises himself all the way back then that some day he'll become a cop and shoot their asses full of stun-gun darts. Hopefully these thoughts would help distract him from doing the breath-o-lyzer thing.

“Sorry,” she added, “we'll just move on now,” and she started the motor.

“Step out of the car!”

...Actually, that was poetic license. If he had said that, it would be a different kind of book. Instead we got lucky.

All he said was, "Okay, go on home. It's late." He spoke more like Barney Fife than some dude from CSI.

She nodded and rolled up the window. He started waddling away.

She drove away from the curb and slowly past the squad car, its twirling blue light spinning shadows through our front window.

She waved at him, "Fuck you, Mr. Fatness!" she sang out. We cracked up laughing until we were shaking, coughing, losing our breath. She was pounding on the steering wheel laughing out of control. I had to remind her to stop at a red light.

Off we flew down 19th Avenue heading towards the bridge.

"That's better," she said finally. "Now I'm all sobered up."

Chapter 6

What was not spoken during any of those thirty-six hours I was with her was what was going to happen two months later. Neither of us had the ability to change what was now written in stone – she was going to Wesleyan, smack dab in the middle of Middletown, Connecticut. And I was going to UC Berkeley, which ironically was less than an hour from her parent’s house. When she was home on a long school break would I stay in the Bay Area so I could see her, or go home to see my parents in LA? We had no idea how this could work out, but one thing neither of us wanted to do was spoil even one second of our perilous, precious, wildly entertaining tryst.

Newsflash: Endings happen. We hugged goodbye at the airport, trying not to get too freaked about the separation. We promised to see each other soon. Maybe next weekend. Somehow. Somewhere. We still had two whole months before the unknown sun set upon us.

* * *

Back home with my parents and sister – I tried to erase the pain and keep the memories of the joy, but that’s not the way love works, now is it? No pain, no gain. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Blah, blah, blah. And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love...well what’s the difference what cliché you try to rationalize about it – it sucked.

I tried to pass the time hanging out with my once good friends who were now spending most of their time on Facebook. Andre Tresh was one such geeky friend quickly becoming one hundred percent cyber on me. He smoked cigarettes, and everything else too, but never once did I see him cough, and he could drink everyone under the table without the awful residuals that come with that kind of fun. He'd wake up fresh as a daisy. He credited these superhuman abilities to working out. I said, "How do you work out your lungs and stomach and brain in a gym?" To which he replied, "Fuck off, Mayo." Andre wanted to be a doctor. You know, do something compassionate for humanity. It said so right on his Facebook page.

Another friend of mine played guitar in a band that was gigging every weekend in dank smelly clubs all over lovely downtown Los Angeles. His name was Chris Caverston. The band was called, "The Wonks." They prided themselves on deep "philo-psycho-political" lyrics lightly sprinkled with literary references, along with a medium dose of werewolves, zombies, and dark gods that alluded to some bastardized version of Greek mythology. Chris wrote the music. Andre and Chris were friends. Andre even did the lighting for some of The Wonks' gigs, in places where there *was* lighting. Most of the gigs were under a bare light bulb or two. Lighting in those clubs was enhanced by the frequent lighting up of Zig Zags near the stage.

Soon after my plane ride to San Francisco hit the neighborhood news we all met at Chico's Mexican Taqueria for a beer and some free chips and salsa, and they grilled me (no pun intended) on the details. So after enough alcohol to

un-pry my modesty (I think I also just didn't like the idea of them setting me up later for some "I told you so" ridicule if everything fell apart) I told them about this unreal thing that happened. I met a girl in PARIS, with the name of someone's grandmother, who wore clothes that were like Avril cast-offs, who was funny and smart and drove me around in a green Jag, and when she took off her clothes she glowed like an angel. And her eyes were so luminescent they were almost radioactive. I mean I played it up a bit. I turned her into a myth—just like they secretly wanted me to, but really didn't want me to. They were drooling, hands covering their eyes. Shaking their heads. They wanted what I had, and were becoming jealous, and therefore sarcastic. They had to try to drag the myth down to earth so they could stomp all over it. Because it's the only alternative to not having it yourself. There's nothing like friends.

When I got home I saw that Ruth had called my cell, which I'd left home on my bed. It was only ten so I called her back, still a little looped. I was hoping she missed me and wanted to sneak off somewhere this coming weekend. I went over to my computer. What was halfway between LA and San Francisco?

I Googled "halfway between LA and SF":

Shelly "who loves red wine anytime". says:

Madonna Inn is really romantic and cool in a retro sort of way. There are lots of places along highway 1.

Marilyn Monroe from Mexico. says:

Carmel

Gustie Wind Z. says:

Madonna Inn? Well not really. In fact, anything but the Madonna Inn - unless you two are aging swingers with a caveman fetish.

Eggyweggyed says:

take the 5 freeway; u will pass a HUGE cow pasture, make sure u don't roll down the windows. it smells pretty cruddy. i have stopped my car there quite often to take a picture of the cows w/ my hubby. passerbys will stare at u but just ignore them and keep on snapping those pics!! Nice place! I love cows!

I took some mental notes: No Madonna Inn. No cow pastures. Maybe Carmel.

When she answered the phone her voice seemed subdued.

"Hey!" I chirped, trying not to sound happier then a chirp.

"I really like you, Mayor. I mean I *really* like you," she said slowly.

Uh oh, I thought. She's had a boyfriend all this time.

Or maybe she met someone at the airport after she dropped me off.

Or...

"But my parents found out about us and what happened last weekend. And. Mayor, I'm like so skunked. I'm so screwed. Docked for the rest of the summer. D.O.A."

"Wow, how did they find out?"

"Neighbors. The fucking 'Neighborhood Watch.' These goons live up the street from us that are, like, once a year friends of my mom and dad's. I think they're big time religious nuts, dedicated to keeping me a virgin. You know, they buy me things like Muslim veils for Christmas. Turns out my mom told them to keep an eye on me while they were gone, so they must have bought a fucking Hubble telescope for the occasion."

"We have to do something! Maybe I could call your parents and apologize?"

"Call *who*?"

"Your mom and dad? I'm *good* with parents!"

"Hello, cuckoo dude! Mr. Innocent! You think you can, like, get on the horn and pull a Zac Efron? Or a Jerry McGuire? I appreciate the insane gesture, but they would lure you up here to Mill Valley, telling you everything's cool, and then kill you. Do you want to be the dead guy in a B-movie?"

“Ok, ok, so. . .” I began fidgeting with some of the non-functioning buttons on my cell phone, which I did when I got frustrated or nervous. “How am I going to see you again?”

“Billion dollar question.”

There was silence, for too long.

Then: “Oh shit,” she whispered, “gotta go, the guards are coming.”

She hung up. I was left alone to figure out what just happened, and how we could work our way out of this. There had to be a way.

I watched some plasma to calm myself. All crap, as always. I flicked channels every second or two: images of a murder, a rape, a woman hitting a man, a police chase, a court scene, a man hitting woman, a bomb going off, a kiss interrupted by the guy being stabbed. That last one was all I could take.

Got sleepy. Turned off the plasma with the soft rubbery push of the red power button. Turned on some music with the other remote. Marilyn Manson. Anger, screaming, jarring. Just the right fit.

Got all revved up. Couldn't sleep. So I decided to try to do some homework, long ignored. I mean, after you get into your “first choice,” who the hell cares about senior year homework anymore? Ruthy was completely filling up every synapse and muscle. I didn't want to have to get up the next morning. Why? Why walk? Why eat? Why get toasted with

a bunch of goon-head friends who are ready to laugh their fucking heads off at my pain.

I fantasized about turning back the clock, changing cultures, to a place where there are pre-arranged marriages. I would hang out with the guys in the rice fields all day then go back to the hut and eat fish. What was so fucking weird or stupid about that? Compared to this?

Chapter 7

I was now officially pining, according to the online Webster's dictionary:

1 : to lose vigor, health, or flesh (as through grief).

2 : to yearn intensely and persistently especially for something unattainable.

Ruthy and I still talked, and texted, but we were walled-off by Parent Prison. Her parents were all over every excuse she could think of to get away, and she wasn't about to just blow them off and run away. They were paying for college. She wasn't about to do anything purely stupid because deep within that grungy wild brain of hers was a very smart and very pragmatic and organized person who had a goal, had a life to lead, unlike yours truly.

Plus, her parents weren't particularly bad or unfair as parents go, when you stop and think about it. I mean, first she lied to them, then she snuck a boy into their house while they were gone who groped her for like two straight days, all this just two months before the boy was very likely never going to see her again. And, you know, parents will be parents. It's not like they were going to say to her, "Ya know, he's a good kid. I mean, you met in Paris, so we understand. It's such a romantic place. Go ahead and fly to LA and shack up in a motel for a week with this wonderful young man of yours and *get it out of your system*. In fact, have

you ever been to the Madonna Inn? It's halfway between here and LA."

Because that would have been so totally fine with me!

But no, parents will be parents. And if I were a parent, and it's not apparent I ever will be, I'd probably have worked her over pretty good. I'd have threatened to kill me. In fact, if I were that rich the threat might have come from a family attorney or something. I can be pretty good at seeing both sides of things.

So I half expected this when she called me one night about two weeks before school started and told me.

"We just got off on the wrong foot."

"Yeah."

"But we sure had fun while it lasted."

"Yeah."

"And we can stay friends, right? Are you on Facebook?"

"No, and I don't plan to be," I said.

"Are you angry?"

"Me? Yeah, I am. I hate Facebook for some reason, but I just can't explain it."

"Oh."

"Listen Ruthy, have a great time in school. Maybe during the Christmas break we..."

“You too, Mayor. UC Berkeley will be a blast. You’ll meet some cool people there.”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

And that’s the way it ended, with everything being okay, but not okay; because no one was supposed to say it wasn’t okay – that definitely wouldn’t have been okay, because nothing could change what wasn’t okay.

Chapter 8

But see, that's just not me. That was not the way I was brought up. My dad told me he hates quitters. He hates Dodger fans that leave in the 7th inning to beat the traffic. He hates governors that quit right in the middle of their term to run for president. So I was used to fighting through quitting, and wanting to sleep forever to escape everything, whenever something isn't working out. I wasn't going to let things end.

And there's something else that's just not me, I was finding out – it was not me to go to college and forget about Ruth. In fact, it was not me to even want to go to college. Because if I went I wouldn't want to quit. But I wasn't sure that was the life road I wanted to go down. Nobody'd ever asked me what I thought about college. It was only which college, never a choice of no college. But I was restless, had always felt restless. And I didn't want to just walk into a little black mouse trap with no way out once I was in there. I mean, what price do you have to pay for a mouse-sized piece of cheese?

I didn't want a poor imitation of a life. I didn't want a poor imitation of what I'd had with Ruthy in the short time we knew each other. I had been shut down and invisible for too long. I had gotten drunk and stoned and watched TV, hypnotized by holding the button down and letting the channels change without even stopping to hear or see anything more than a kaleidoscope of images flicking by. Bored by a corrupt clueless culture coruscating by in rapid

motion. I mean, the whole thing seemed like a senseless disaster: TV, life, love. Things where highs lead to lows, and lows get violent, but with faked murders, and fake love – what the hell were all these things they put on TV really trying to say? That life is all just one big fake? They even faked reality TV, I bet. Reality seems to imitate TV now instead of visa versa.

Anyway, it dawned on me one night as I hung out with Andre and Chris for the last time until we all shoved off to our new life at college, that UC Berkeley was also a fake. No faker than any other school. Not trying to dis the Golden Bears or anything. But let's face it, the whole thing was a set-up, to push me into their game, to get me to become one of them. Instead of one of me.

But I knew I was never going to become one of them. I just didn't have it in me, even with my best effort. I was a natural outcast. A stranger to normalcy. A cause waiting to happen.

And then it happened: One drunken stoned out moment in time, there, as Andre and Chris and I stumbled around Venice Beach, and then wandered down to the boardwalk amongst the day-old litter and the street lamps that reflected off of the ocean. Andre took out the hugest thickest joint ever rolled in the western hemisphere, unless Jamaica is in the western hemisphere – what he called “The Giant Killer” – it was a triple pun, since there was some wrestle mania dude called, “Andre, The Giant Killer,” then there was the obvious fact that the spliff in question was giant in size, and, of course, marijuana was called “the deadly weed” – killer of innocent men, women and children

everywhere (back in the lovely fifties when whatever they said in the movie newsreels was true).

And then there was the fact that we all had these giant problems that needed slaying, and the deadly weed was without a doubt the only way to wipe them away, like rain off a windshield, and replace them with something a lot sillier, like a windshield filled with eyeballs begging to drive, or a wind-filled shield of doom held high by a night of knights...all stoned-out and ready to slay...something.

Feeling the smoke expand ever so whitely in my lungs, I believed (on pure faith) that in just seconds something unbelievable and virtually unprecedented would replace my morose pity party, and, yes, YES, here it was, coming now — a sudden image of Andre's hair sparkling in the lamplight, like an aura of stars, like cosmic dandruff, seemingly twinkling right there in his jet back curly mop, with the ocean crackling its wave-landings loudly in the background. I think someone must have amplified it while we were inhaling.

"Stars," I mumbled, squinting at his hair.

"Nebula," Andre screamed at the top of his lungs, with his arms aloft, smiling like "The Wizard" in "August Rush."

"Nebraska!" said Chris, playing off of nebula in an alliterative rural kind of way, but mostly hearing new music in his head, per usual whenever he was in an altered state, and not paying a lot of attention to us. "Alaska," he then followed this with...Springsteen, followed by Sarah, the Moose, Palin? This is why he left writing lyrics to the drummer.

At this moment in time Ruth was settling in at Wesleyan, since her orientation started earlier than mine. She was a light-year removed from me. Maybe seeing me as her Paris fling, a graduation present before settling down to college, a boy friend becoming a fiancé, and a job, and marriage and children. I was fading like a star in a Nebraska sunrise.

Back on Venice beach, I rolled around on the sand with two wasted brethren until we all looked stunningly pig-like. Damp sand was hanging off of our clothes like mud. In fact, we pretended we were rolling in mud. We oinked and grunted at each other for a while, pushing each other over, rolling on top of each other, making each other wheeze with laughter, with sand getting in our mouths. "Oxygen," Chris begged, the composition he'd been drinking in from the invisible airwaves was now dehydrated, lost forever, running away from three lost madmen at the speed of sound. Sand was gathering on his tongue like wet cement. I believe, "oxygen" meant "water" in his world.

And then, as I lay there on the beach looking up at a single twinkling star that peeked weakly through the smog-filled atmosphere of the LA basin, winking at me from deep space, maybe a hundred million light years away, fresh as a daisy from a hundred million year journey only to land right into the retina of my dilated eyes, it occurred to me there was a small chance that it had come all this way just to send me this one message, this one real thought, filtering through all the incongruous insanity I had inhaled, one thought that could change my life on the spot forever. It was this, simple but profound – Ruth rhymed with – truth. Ruth, truth.

Right? Because she was the only thing in my life that wasn't a fake. So maybe, just maybe – my head was scrambling to unscramble this cryptic message from the light of the star –

I heard a mumbly hum similar to the one in the monolith scene in the old classic, "2001 Space Odyssey" –

my mind, which no longer resembled the mind I once knew an hour before, had reassembled itself into something more lit up, more alive. I was no longer a Neanderthal following another Neanderthal's butt down some dirt road into an ambush. I had touched a star! I was stricken with consciousness! –

suddenly, the cause – my cause – appeared, bright as a lighthouse beacon, as clear as the Eiffel Tower from Pont de Grenelle, flashing, strobing, at the strike of midnight –

her, there. I had to go, to revisit the memories.... I had to go. Not to Paris. Not to the street where we first kissed –

I had to get on a plane to Connecticut.... I had to see her, tomorrow!

I had no idea what we would do after that. Or if she would even want to see me.

But if I didn't go I would never find out...anything.

I had to follow the only direction that was clear to me. My mind-compass pointed due east. (Or extremely far west, given the multi-directional nature of this soft-blue round earth bubble we were swirling around on.)

There was no middle path that could get me to Middletown. This was not a Buddha-calm surrender to what is. This was a rocket launch, right into the heart of my desire-filled meaning-starved life.

Chapter 9

My parents were none too happy with my decision, to put it mildly. To be clear, they told me I was insane. The problem with this argument was that I agreed I was insane. They had no response to that other than to offer the name of a therapist in the city. “I’m not getting on a plane once a week all the way from Connecticut to see a therapist in the city,” I told them.

But, here’s the truth beyond the cultural definition of insanity. No one could say for sure if it would ultimately be a disaster for me to do this or not. Some other plan could turn out worse, or, possibly better. Even if I joined the march of students to UC Berkeley; it might turn out better, it might turn out worse. My revelation this morning was: it was just my parents’ job to play the odds. To play it safe. Not to look at the individual in front of them, but to work the stats. I was a number in the teenage actuarial table. Not just my parents’ actuarial table, but my teachers’, the medias’, the governments’, *they all knew the odds*, and all told me what the plan should be.

Statistically, they warned me, this is what works out most often. But the question in my mind was – who was I beyond the stats? What did I really want out of life? What was that star trying to tell me when my mind was unlocked from the game? And, most importantly, why shouldn’t I be the one making the plan?

My piggy bank was emptied, my bags were packed, my iPod was fully loaded, my cell phone was all charged up, this was a brand new start. I had about \$5,000 saved up from various odd jobs and birthdays and Christmas gifts from relatives. They usually had no idea what to buy me so they shoved twenty bucks in an envelope with something scribbled on it – Happy, whatever, and what do they call you these days? “Mayhem?” Yuk, yuk, yuk!!!!!! Love Old Uncle Rusty.

Save it, I told myself. It was the voice of my father, clear as day – my financially savvy father – whispering in my head – trying to instill a sense of fiscal discipline into the quivering brain of a *love-smitten raving maniac*. Nice try, dad.

I decided not to let Ruthy know I was coming. I booked my flight a week in advance. I didn’t want to screw her up during registration and that first crucial week of classes. I figured I’d wait and screw her up after that. A fair compromise. I was playing my own odds that she wouldn’t have found some guy to take my place by then.

I arrived in Middletown on a perfect fall day. The color of the sky was deep-space blue. Bright red-leafed trees stood proudly next to yellow-haloed trees. The air was cool and fresh and had a mildly inebriating affect. Fallen leaves swirled upon the ground, mixing together like splashes of pastel paint. Tens of thousands of leaves were raked into nice big piles on the side of the road. These were the leaves having plans made for them – swept aside by man. But then a gust of wind freed them, lifting the top layer of leaves into the air. They skittered down the road, hip-hopping freely with each new gust.

I found a nice inn near the campus called, “The Inn.” A tribute to understatement, or totally uncreative, or both. I proudly gave the receptionist some cash to pay for one night. Ever the pessimist. I felt like a foreigner on an impossible mission – a mission to rekindle a love that had been stolen by enemy soldiers. Surely she would fall into my arms at the first sight of me. Or not.

I was given a room key, quickly threw my knapsack on the perfectly made quilted bed, looked at my face in the mirror hanging above the sink of the small ultra clean and shiny white bathroom, decided there was nothing I could do, my face wasn't changeable in any positive way, hair would be messed up by the time I got to the campus even if I were to comb it now, so whatever will be will be, and I immediately made my way toward the university gate.

I entered Wesleyan on a street ironically called, “High Street.” I was completely in outer space mentally – still trying to decipher that star. Was it laughing at me now, telling me it was all a big joke?

I ran around asking students if they knew the whereabouts of Ruth Delaney, but it was a pretty big school. Two thousand kids. And she was a newcomer. I found the admissions office but they wanted to know why I was here, and who I was. *Well, that's exactly what I'm trying to find out!*

Back out onto High Street I went. I followed cars. Sometimes running after one that looked like it might stop for me. Someone walking out of Parking lot “A” overheard me asking a student if they, by some crazy chance, knew where I could find Ruth Delaney. Just as I slumped

dejectedly away from another giggling group of girls secretly wondering why a girl their age would be named Ruth, I felt a tap on my arm. "You're looking for Ruth Delaney?"

The words were spoken by a blonde girl with a sweet Midwestern face, fresh as the autumn air, wearing a fashionable gray wool overcoat, carrying a computer bag on her shoulder, and the requisite amount of thick books under her arm.

"Yes, you know her?"

"I'm in one of her classes. I think she's at Olin right now."

"Olin?"

"Olin Memorial Library." She pointed with her free hand to a building in the middle of campus.

"Thank you!" *I kissed her – mwaa.* "Thank you!"

"But..." I thought I heard her mumble. But I had no time for buts, I ran full speed towards the library.

The building jiggled up and down, getting larger and larger as I ran towards it. Finally I dashed through the glass doors of Olin Memorial, asking Mr. Olin to wish me luck. A picture of him hung on the wall near the entrance. "Were you ever in love, Mr. Olin? In love with more than just knowledge and words and education? Were you ever so in love that all you wanted to do was shine like the sun and beg for mercy because your heart was about to crash into walls with joy and fear and sadness and a euphoria that not

even the best high in the universe could transport you to?
You understand what I'm saying, Mr. Olin?"

I stood near the reference files and began to look around amongst the book aisles, and the round study tables, and the...then at a corner table, I saw her. She was sitting with some other person. A guy person, actually. A guy person who was looking over her shoulder, not so subtly breathing in the smell of her hair and neck. Which I admit I had never really tried to do myself. But I made a note for next time, if there would be a next time....

She looked over in my direction suddenly, for no particular reason. Maybe a ghost cleared its throat and whispered in her ear. She did a double take just like you see in the movies, and stood up like she'd seen an assassin. "Oh my God!" she said too loudly for being in a library.

The guy seemed to be asking her what was going on, but she pushed his hand back and came over to me. "What in the world are you doing here, Mayor?"

"You," was all I could manage.

"Berkeley?"

"No."

"*What? Why?*"

"You."

"Oh my God," she said again. Her hand covered her mouth. Her eyebrows raised. Her face looked a bit contorted.

“Him?” I asked.

“Yes, well...” she said quietly. Not proud, but no hint of shame.

I nodded, heart crashing back down to earth. SLAM!
Brain stapled to the floor.

Silence.

Stillness.

More crashing.

Doom was landing dry and dusty in my throat.
Couldn't speak. Had to go, but couldn't move.

“But you,” she said, “Mayor, I couldn't get you out of my head. He's going to have to...just go away.”

The electricity of the world suddenly came back on. Lights hummed, flickering at first, until the darkness lifted. I found myself crawling back into my body. It took me a few thousand synapses firing at the speed of infinity to really even hear her. But then it stuck. They'd dug a nice new pathway called 'maybe the world works' in my brain.

Chapter 10

She grabbed her books and whispered something to the guy at her table. Must have been something like, “My brother’s in town, surprise visit, gotta go, I’ll call ya babe,” because he didn’t protest. He just sat back down to read his text book. He glanced up at me once as she bounced over to me. But I didn’t wave or smile or anything because I didn’t know who I was supposed to be.

I took her arm and we walked off campus amongst the trippy-bright colors of autumn to The Inn. We walked up the old red carpet to the second floor and I found the key. “Entrez-vous,” I said. “Welcome to Paris, Connecticut.”

It was crazy. She walked slowly around the tiny room, looking around, peering out the window to the diner across the street, brushing her hand across the desk, not looking at me, thinking about what to say. I sat on the bed watching her, waiting.

“What do you expect, Mayor, you come bounding into town from out of nowhere and expect everything to just be like before?”

“Yes.”

She stared at me and burst out laughing.

Then she sat next to me and gave me a very sisterly kiss on the cheek.

I waited until she put her hands back down by her side. She looked at the white wall straight ahead of us, then took a breath to say something, but I figured, if I let her say one more word it may be too late. Words are powerful, unretractable, like Parisian buildings; once they're constructed they last for all time.

So I kissed her without holding back. I eased her down onto the bed and caressed and kissed every part of her cloud-essenced skin. We went back to that place we knew, the place that had been interrupted for so long, until finally I found myself resting in her arms, smelling her hair and neck, feeling at peace for the first time since I saw her last.

I didn't have any food to offer her. So we tripped over to the café down the street where a flock of students were hanging out, pretending to study but secretly looking for someone to love. Even the giggly girls in glasses hiding at the corner tables were looking around, but they would never dare admit it. They kept their books open on the table even while sipping their coffee.

Pizza and beer were our main course, followed by warm peach something, smothered in ice cream. This truly was Paris, Connecticut. Five stars for the deep dish pizza with olives and hot red peppers. And the atmosphere too was beautiful – the music was too soft, the waitresses were too loud, fractured paintings hanging crookedly on the red brick walls, too hard to see in the dim light, smell of beer in the air, wondrous, electric – because she was there.

* * *

Once we got back to The Inn I just had to make love with her again, trying to remember even while it was happening all those things words and images can't recreate. When I finally got up, I felt a new electrical charge of energy and reached for my iPod . I had to turn her on to this new CD I'd been listening to on the plane. But she stopped me.

"Tell me, Mayor," her arm was resting behind her head, a blanket covering her up to her chin, "what are you expecting from all this?"

"All what?" I pretended not to understand.

"This!" she said quietly. "You basically went AWOL from school, now you're here with me. But I can't just be here in this room with you, like a still-life picture, for the rest of eternity. Time moves objects around you know, even me."

"And you're going back to school tomorrow?"

"Of course!" She seemed perplexed at the question.

"Well, I haven't thought any further than this night," I said honestly.

"Shock of shocks," she teased, closing her eyes in a condescending way. "But what are you *thinking*, dude? Doesn't it flip you out that you should be registering tomorrow? Don't you have any idea how badly this could screw up your life? What are you expecting to happen? You want me to drop out too, so we can travel around the world on our parents' credit cards until they cancel them, maybe

go back to Paris where I can dance for you at sunset without anyone thinking we're raving lunatics?"

"That sounds great!"

"But for how long. Mayor? I mean, I am so glad you're here, I am. I'm not trying to sound like a snarling haggly parent or anything, but, what are you going to do now?"

I interrupted, "You think I wasn't thinking about things when I came here? Ruthy, let's say I graduated UC Berkeley, *with honors*, and then I get this job as president of a bank or something, and I bring home lots of money, enough money to support you so we can have a flock of babies. That is reality as we know it, and our parents know it? Right? But what is that? Is that all, is that everything? Or is there something deeper that gets left on the road along the way, like, like autumn leaves piled up on the side of the road! Who cares about fucking leaves when I have to get to work, or catch a train, or get to class, and they march us all around until someone pays for our funeral, and picks the flower arrangement, and we never even *tried*."

I looked at her face, her eyebrows were furrowed. I wasn't done.

"You don't want to run off into the sunset with me to see what's there? Okay, so instead you marry Arnold back there in the library, or whatever his name is. And he gets a better job than me. But you have a degree too! Right? So you both work at jobs, but they're challenging jobs, and let's say somehow they don't kill your souls entirely. Let's put that improbable factor into the equation. And then, of course,

you have kids, and they go to day care so you can keep working, so you can buy a house with more rooms, so you can have more kids. ...And they grow up, right? And sometimes they make sense to you, and sometimes they don't. And sometimes they get sick when they're little and you have to take care of them, but by the time they are in high school they don't give a damn what you did for them when they were eight, because now they're not a part of you anymore, they're out of control. Your kids are out of your control.... And sometimes they fuck their boyfriends in their little pink rooms while their dolls watch them. And sometimes they have to lie or they'll hurt your feelings because you don't get it. But in the end, it all works out, they get over the high school hormone thing, they go to college, get good jobs, and they get married, right? Just like mommy did.... And now, praise the lord, you have grand kids! Wow! And Arnold back at the library, well, he became very successful and left you a nice estate when he died, so you don't have to worry about anything, even though you were totally capable of supporting yourself anyway, money is great. You'll never have to worry again!. That was his meaning to life, to leave an estate. You'll take it. And so now he's dead, and you're living in a condo in Boca, limping around on your little fat legs, cooking soup from a can for dinner, hoping and praying that your kids will bring the grand kids to see you at Christmas....And that's the meaning of life? Is that what you think is a sane plan? A good use of your future time? And it's worth spending all of your present time sacrificing to get there?"

"You know the really sick thing about you, Mayor?"
She paused to shake her head and gather herself. But tears

were forming in her deep blue eyes. “*You make sense,*” she screamed. “You do! You’re like a computer virus, eating away at the software in my brain and rearranging all the data to fit your code. And I’m beginning to hate that about you. Because you’re screwing up what I thought was a perfectly good life. You’re a disease. And I can’t get rid of you.”

“If your plan was so perfect then why can’t you get me out of your head? If everything was so perfectly grand, I guess you could go back to Arnold tomorrow and tell him you and your brother had a really good time, but that he’s your guy. I won’t tell.”

“His name was Eric! I mean, *is* Eric.”

“Well, make up your mind. Is he *was*, or is he *is*?”

She laughed. “‘Was,’ I think. I mean he was never really an ‘is,’ but, look, I’m still not even sure about ‘the new is’ who was a ‘was’ until a few hours ago. I don’t know if this is just a sweet dream, or something that’s supposed to be a part of my future. All your crazy ideas...”

“Well let’s find out. Because, guess what I found out, Ruthy? Reality as we know it is a lie.”

She put her hands over her eyes and laid back on the bed. The wheels were turning.

I laid down beside her, “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“For giving you a choice,” I said.

She nodded.

More wheels turning.

Then she let out a scream, of anger, of confusion, that startled me. Then she whispered, "Okay, but what reality does work, Mayor? Make up a plan if you want to, but you're going to have to come up with something that makes sense on some level. You can't just tear down everything that is, and then leave me with nothing in its place. If everything we were hoping for is a lie, what's the truth?"

Chapter 11

The next morning found us rising slowly from our dreams there in room “4.” She was skipping biology class this morning, because now she wasn’t even sure she should be in biology class, or any class. Her life was a topsy turvy tug-of-war, a messy fight between logic and, well, me.

Logic still told her to stay in school and follow the fate set-up for her long ago by her parents and the social rules of engagement. But logic also revealed other things she’d rarely considered before: Her dad hated work. She knew that clearly. Her mom seemed frustrated all the time – with him, with herself. Yes, they went to Paris for their twentieth anniversary, but Ruth wasn’t so sure they were happy about most of those twenty years together. They were celebrating because that too was a part of the way things were done. In Mill Valley the friends and neighbor folk approved of the trip – ah Paris! Twentieth? Perfect! So romantic. They applauded the love birds as they sped off in a white stretch limo to the airport. None of it made sense, it was merely logical.

Ruth was also appalled to realize, tearily, wearily, eerily, that she was just as much a waif and a reject as I was. She questioned everything, she always had. The difference between us was that she questioned but then obeyed. But not anymore, maybe.

She turned her mirror on me, since she had no answers for herself. “Mayor, isn’t there *anything* you’ve ever wanted

to be? Something you'd be willing to dedicate yourself to, besides me?"

I was brushing my teeth at that moment, wondering where we might eat for breakfast.

"A dentist," I spit out the toothpaste and ran my cupped hands under the water. "I don't know why – it kind of just came to me."

"I'm serious! I mean if you could do anything in the world, what would you do?"

Long silence as I wiped my face on The Inn's nice white towel. Fresh. Smell of bleach and some European-smelling perfume. I could get used to this lifestyle if I had endless money.

I exited the little white bathroom and sat beside her on the unmade bed.

She said, "You've told me you were great at math, and liked science. Wouldn't you like to do something exciting some day, like build rockets?" Her eyes lit up with excitement for me. I wished I could feel about rockets at that moment the way she did.

"Maiming and destruction."

"What?" She looked confused, the light in her eyes dimming.

"That's all it would lead to – maiming and destruction. They don't just use rocket technology to catapult some dude up to Mars. They use it to make bombs and missiles too. Why should I add to all that?"

“Okay,” she said, “You love sports. You said you are a good basketball player. How about joining the UC Berkeley basketball team?”

“More maiming and destruction,” I said.

“What?”

“Ruth, without intentionally committing homicide they would trample me like a bug, slam me down, step on my face. I would be eaten for breakfast – speaking of which...”

“Oh come on, why the sudden lack of confidence?”

“It’s not a lack of confidence, it’s a lack of about eight inches and fifty pounds of muscle. A five foot seven, one hundred forty pound college basketball player is cannon fodder.”

“Muggsy Bogues!” she shot back.

“*What?*”

“*Muggsy Bogues,*” she repeated.

“Wow, I’m, like, so impressed!”

She smiled. “You’re a lot taller than five foot three. That’s how tall Muggsy was, and he was playing in the NBA!”

“I am really, REALLY impressed! You’re – you know what?” I sat closer to her, “You’re amazing. Have I ever told you that?”

“Several times,” she laughed. “All for completely depraved reasons.”

“Even your sense of humor is so damn great!” I was gushing.

“Hey, how about you?” I asked. “What do you want to do?”

She smiled sheepishly and shrugged her shoulders.

“You have such a great sense of humor. How about becoming a stand-up comic!”

“As opposed to you, lover-boy, being a comic when you’re lying down?”

“See? See how fucking funny you are?” I playfully lunged at her. I sat on top of her, holding her arms down with one hand while trying to tickle her mercilessly with the other.

“Stop, please, I’m serious! I hate tickling.”

I stopped. I wanted to build trust. “‘Hate’ is a powerful word.”

“Okay, I seriously dislike it.”

“How about this? Is this a fair compromise?” I kissed her and began to touch her warm creamy skin.

Forget breakfast. She was my food. She was my air. She was what I wanted to do. But love is never enough, is it? Not in this life.

Chapter 12

“So I have a profession for you to consider,” I said. We were scarfing down eggs and toast at the café.

“Go on, weirdo.”

“I’m not kidding about this. You are not like the other Wesleyan-tonians, no offense. They are not your people! They are...the other people. ...And yet, somehow you are comfortable in both worlds, right? You understand all dimensions. Theirs, yours, mine. And you’re great at inspiring people! You *are*! You make people feel like they can be real with you. And you have a good heart. And you’re super smart, of course. So I think...” I took a bite of my egg to add a bit more drama, then said, “you ought to be a psychologist!”

“A *psych*...what are you, a college version of the Wizard of Oz handing out jobs now?”

“Well, that’s what I could have said about your suggestions this morning! *Rocket scientist?*”

“Touché. But forget it, okay?”

“Forgotten. Like total senility-permanent forgotten.”

She said, “I know you don’t want to be pinned down, Mayor, but I just think, at some point, I mean, we can’t just click our heels and go back to Kansas! Ain’t no Kansas in the future. And Toto’s dead.”

Reality cooled and turned to ice – a sprinkling of snowflakes hit our cheeks as we walked back to The Inn. It turned icy financially, as well – I was running out of money.

I was going through my \$5,000 way too fast. I was trying to preserve it like someone might try to preserve a canteen of water while crossing the Mohave desert.

And believe me, if you haven't been to the Mohave desert, do yourself a big fat fucking favor and don't go.

Meanwhile. Money is the cultural totem that affects bums and dreamers alike. It's the weathervane of our form of reality. It's a matter of life and death. Power and weakness. And that issue wasn't going away just because I was in love.

Another thing one had to consider: Was I just playing the part of the serpent in the allegory of Adam and Eve? Tempting Ruth with knowledge and freedom while possessing neither myself? Was Eric playing the role of Adam while I was the snake? What if I was tearing her away from the one she should have been with just so I could have her for myself for as long as possible with no idea why? Admittedly, none of this actually crossed my mind at the time. But it did later.

Chapter 13

The Inn was an interesting unintentional metaphor, because it's where we got "inside" our heads and inside our relationship on every level. But on the third day we began to feel aimless, hanging out all day with the fire going in the small room. Not aimless enough to watch TV, but close to that kind of dead feeling. So we started playing cards. Gin, black jack, poker. Her parents had taught her well.

"Tell me about Eric... When you kissed, was it as good as our kiss was in Paris that first night in front of the garden?"

"I have no idea."

"Why not?"

"Because we never kissed."

"But you said..."

"No, *you* said."

"What you are talking about?"

"You said, 'Him?' And I said, 'Yes.' But all I meant is, yes, we went on a date the night before, and yes I liked him a little, and yes I knew he was into me, and I didn't know where it might lead eventually, so if you hadn't dragged your sorry ass into the library I think I would have gone out with him again."

“Oh,” I smiled. “Well, that’s a whole lot better than you telling me something that would have made me ill – like details about how his tongue felt....”

“Glad to oblige,” she interrupted, wanting to change the subject.

“So what is *he* going to do once he gets out of the pen?”

“Actually, Mr. Hobo, he wants to be an engineer.”

“*An engineer?* Like a choo choo engineer?”

“Yes, right, he wants to be the conductor of “The Little Train That Could,” and work his way up the corporate ladder all the way to switchman.”

“Nice.”

“Actually, he wants to be an electrical engineer, since you must know.”

I nodded seriously. “Electric trains?”

“Or an industrial...engineer. *Something like that...*I really wasn’t listening to what he was saying, you know?” She laughed hard, maybe realizing how boring the guy was. Plus I was making her feel a bit goofy.

“He’ll be better off working on a train than working for some big company on the stock exchange,” I said.

“Okay, Mr. Carl Marx, Jr., like you know.”

“I hope I made the right decision!” she said, shaking her head. I started to sound out of touch to her.

“You did, for now,” I chimed back sarcastically. We were euphoric. I was just so funny, wasn’t I? Too bad my joke was so prophetic.

Chapter 14

When we woke up the next morning it was a Sunday. The cold sun was shining weakly through the window of The Inn. This was the last day of rest for us. I could no longer afford to rent the room. Reality was coming down the track from somewhere east of Eden, with its little white headlight shimmering in the distance.

“Let me treat you to breakfast again this morning, Mayor. Because...well...I have something to tell you. And you might not be so hungry after I tell you. So it’s not going to cost me that much.”

I couldn’t read her. “What is it? Tell me now.” Could it be Eric was more than just an engineer to her?

“Okay, here it is, Mayor. I need to go back...to school. I need to make up the classes I missed last week, and I need to be a student for the next four years. I know that’s not your dream, not a part of your world, but it’s a part of my world, I’m sure of it now. That reality ultimately may not work for me and you in the long run. But it’s the only thing that feels right to me at this point. I can’t see any other way....”

I sighed. Closed my eyes. “I understand.”

My life was a mess. A shambles. A train wreck. The little train that couldn’t. I couldn’t feel all that much even after she told me the inevitable, I couldn’t think about anything. My perpetual state. So, yeah, I understood. She had a life here, she set up something fine for herself. But

going to college was never going to work for me, even now. That was my truth.

“Stay with me?” she said.

“Really? But how would that work? All I can imagine doing is sitting around all day waiting for you to get out of class so I can take up all your time.”

She said nothing to this. She must have been thinking—how would I study at night? How could I be a good student and a muse at the same time?

“Look, Ruthy, here’s the truth—I am a scam. I am not here or there. I have nothing real to give, I have no plan. Staying here waiting for you to come home from class every night makes zero sense for either of us, you know that.”

Impasse. No way out.

“Or, come to Paris with me!” I shouted, like a light bulb going off in my head.

“Didn’t you hear me, Mayor? I have to go back. I love you! I do! But all the traveling and eating and sex and music and dancing and talking in circles about “what if this,” and “what if that,” *it’s crazy*, ya know? I need a life with a wheel to steer in some direction. I’m sorry, but that’s just me.”

“Well, I can’t stay here. I’ll just screw up your life slowly instead of quickly. You know that.”

She dropped down wearily onto the bed.

Then she said: “Okay, I have an idea. It’s not Paris, but it’s about us, not just me.”

I was hoping for a miracle. Miracles sometimes seem like nothing at the time. But I didn't know that then.

"You're right, you staying here would make no sense for either of us. But I don't need to date anyone at all right now. I really need to study! I need to catch up with all the work I've missed and really put my mind to it. It's not going to be easy. And it's going to take up all of my time if I really want to do my best. So, what if I made a promise to you, and you made a promise to me?"

"Like what?" I was at a loss for a solution. My thoughts were spinning around like a butterfly in a blender.

"Okay, it's mid-September. Why don't you take some time for yourself, see if you can find out what you want to do with your life, and how I might fit in with your plans. Promise me you won't go out with anyone until after Christmas break. I'll promise you the same. Let's not even contact each other for those six weeks. Let's give each other some serious space to re-think everything, no more surprise visits."

"And..."

"And, if you come to me just before Christmas break with a plan that makes sense, and you can figure out a way that we can be together, a way that has even a speck of reality attached to it, then I'll be here to listen. But it has to include me staying here and letting me graduate. That's what I want for myself. And...if you don't show up before Christmas, then I'll know when I go back to see my parents that you're somewhere out there, doing your thing, and I'll

love you from here, from the memory of these days. But we'll never be again."

She took a deep breath, her eyes moistened, glistened.

Her idea made as much sense as anything could have that morning. I said, "Okay then. I'll try to get myself together. I swear. I'll try to figure things out, and..."

Her eyes were filled with tears. "...And I'll see you just before Christmas. You'll see."

I hoped to hell I wasn't telling the biggest damn lie of my life.

Chapter 15

“Hello, Dad.”

“Hey, you! How’s life as a vagabond? Are you done yet, please?”

“Ah, I guess not quite yet, but I’m getting there.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I think I’m making progress.” I felt like I was on a job interview.

“Did your time with Ruth work out?”

“Sort of.”

“Well aren’t you a mystery man? Do you want to talk to me in plain English, or not?”

My dad was a good man. Worked hard as a stock broker, made people a lot of money in bull markets, lost it all back in bear markets. And now, for that, he had become a senior vice president of Merrill. One of millions of senior VPs. But he had a good heart. He lived and died with his clients’ successes and failures. He cared about everyone. Which was more than I could say about myself.

“Where are you?”

“Still in Connecticut. But I’ll be leaving today. I want to come home for a week or two....” my voice trailed off.

“And then?”

“I’ll tell you when I’m home.”

“You’ll tell me now.”

“Okay, dad, but I have a feeling you’re not going to love the idea. I, well, I need to go back to Paris for a while. I need to start back there again. I need to rewind to go forward....”

“*What?* I don’t understand?”

“I just need some time to get my head straight. I think I’m supposed to go back there. I felt something different there, about myself, and about life....”

“Son, you met Ruth there. Remember? And you stayed in a nice hotel, and ate in four star restaurants on our dime. That’s what was different there! I’d go back there too if I could repeat that kind of experience. But I can’t. And you can’t!”

I was silent. He was confusing me like only he could.

“Maybe it was just an impulsive thought,” I added weakly.

This is what I thought he’d scream next:

“IMPULSIVE THOUGHT? THE VERY FIRST IMPULSIVE THOUGHT IN YOUR LIFE, I SUPPOSE? LOOK YOU LITTLE RUNT, THE ENTIRE MESS YOU CALL BEING ALIVE HAS BEEN ONE STUPID-ASSED IMPULSIVE THOUGHT AFTER ANOTHER. AND IF YOU’RE ABOUT TO ASK ME FOR MONEY, I’M NOT ABOUT TO LET YOU

PICK MY POCKET ANYMORE. NOW GET A JOB AS A MECHANIC OR SOMETHING, JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER GOOD UPSTANDING COLLEGE DROP OUT. OR COME HOME WHERE YOU WON'T COST ME ANYTHING BUT ROOM AND BOARD AND SIT IN YOUR ROOM AND SPACE OUT UNDERNEATH YOUR HEADPHONES AND PUNCH AWAY AT YOUR REMOTE ALL DAY WHERE YOU'RE SAFE FROM HARM'S WAY. MORONS TEND TO GET HURT OUT THERE IN THE REAL WORLD."

But he didn't say that.

He mumbled something, as if thinking out loud.

"Look, boy, there are a lot of things I wish I did before I went off to college. I was a hippie, after all. And I understand what you're after. I do. I just don't want to see you waste your life away wandering around in circles. Paris seems to me like a circle."

More silence. I knew he was leading to something.

"Why don't you try UC Berkeley, Mayor. At least give it a try! Maybe it's not too late...."

"It is too late...for me. I don't want to do that. I'd rather come home, get a job until I make enough money to do what I want, go where I want, and figure things out from there. I'm eighteen. I don't see the rush. I'm not ready to surrender yet."

He was listening carefully. He was good at listening. It was a big part of his work. "I think I'm an idiot for saying this," he said, "but I *know* you. I do know you. And I trust

you to find your way eventually. You're a good kid, a smart kid. And you're right, time is on your side."

I was so grateful to hear those words. When a father really gets who you are, nothing can replace that.

"I'll loan you the money to go back to Paris for a while if you think that will help," he blurted out. "Two weeks! *That's it.* After that, the deal is, you'll strongly consider re-applying to Berkeley for the winter semester, if they'll have you. Deal?"

He loved making deals. That's what he did all day long.

"Okay, deal."

"Fine. Two weeks! That's it."

"Thanks dad, thanks so much."

"Mmm," he grunted. Maybe he wasn't sure he'd made the right decision.

"Hey, Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Can I ask you kind of a personal question?"

"And what might that be?"

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I just need to know...Are you happy with your life?"

He laughed a short choppy kind of laugh. "Yes, Mayor, I'm happy."

"How? *Why?* Isn't work...?"

“Work’s okay. Not great.”

“But you spend all your time doing it.”

“Too much time. But I still love life.... I love your mom. I love you, and Darcy. She’s turning into a very special young lady. I’m at peace. I have a wonderful family. You hear what I’m saying?”

“Yeah....”

I sensed another lecture coming on. When he started on a “life lessons” talk, his voice deepened and his words got more formal.

Then he added, “I don’t like all of my life all the time, Mayor. No one does. But I like my life most of the time, and you know what? *You know what?*”

He was repeating the question for drama. Here comes the spin line. I braced myself.

“*That’s as good as it gets!* Okay? That’s as good as it can ever be.”

I knew he wasn’t done.

“You’re searching for something perfect, Mayor, something that will last forever. One perfect endless shining moment that never dies. But that’s a fairytale! Just a fairytale, okay? Not real. Not true. Not possible.”

He could be very persuasive sometimes.

“But life can be good anyway, even without the fairytales. Very worth living, if you work at it. If you dedicate yourself to it. But you can’t be flying off to Paris

every time something goes wrong. Even if you could afford it, that's just not going to satisfy you in the long run. After a while it will stop meaning anything to you. It won't be special. It will just be another escape. Even random improvised experiences, even traveling around the world, free as a bird, can get boring, and lonely! So can buying a big car, or a new house. Which means you have to look deeper."

"What? Be specific! What's 'deeper?'" (I yelled this at him. I wasn't so much defiant as screaming for the truth. Did he actually know the truth?)

"It comes down to 'connection,' not spending your time and energy disconnecting. Unplugging from the way the world operates is only a beginning, it's not a way to live. For many years of your life, Mayor, you were connected, right here with us. But then, when you become a teenager, I guess everything has to get unwound, right? I remember too! You need to unwind everything so you can wind it all back together in your own way. *I understand that, Mayor, I do.* But if you go down that road for too long...well, there's a fine line between a seeker of truth and wisdom, and being a bum floating around without a clue, holding his thumb out on some empty highway. There's a fine line between an adventurer and a bum. Or a rebel and a madman. Just like there's a fine line between a rich man and a beggar – because regardless of how much money a rich man has, if he's a greedy man, or if he's disconnected from the world, he's still a beggar! Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Very clever. I think he'd been working on that last line for a while.

“What do you feel connected to, exactly, dad?”

“I have a connection to real love. And to God, in my own way, I guess. I may not be religious, but I consider myself a spiritual person. So I feel a connection to the world. But you can only understand the value of these connections through a sense of appreciation – you have to understand how bad life can get without those connections before you can appreciate....”

“Appreciate what, exactly?”

“Appreciate having a roof over your head, for one thing! And someone to love you – not just someone to love you when you’re on your best behavior, or on a date, or when you’re kind, or clever, or when your high and you say funny things. But finding someone to love the ‘day to day’ you, that’s something special. That’s worth it. Someone to love the ‘you’ that’s going to be normal and boring. Not a superman. Not a perfect man. Not a hero all the time. When you find that person, and you feel the same way about her, then you get it! And it’s not settling for anything, Mayor, it’s accepting what it is to be tender and human. You can have dreams and follow them but you also need to come to accept what is, what the world has to offer, and what it doesn’t, and then get on with it. And...”

“Okay dad, thanks,” I whispered. Too much to intake. Too many words. Too much that didn’t connect up with my present experiences. I was heart-deaf. Soul-blind. Mind-numb. I’d have to re-read the transcript some day over a glass of booze. Because at eighteen, all I wanted to do was fuck Ruthy, and if I couldn’t do that, then GO TO PARIS! I

am not going to lie to you. That's as far as it went for me at that point in time.

But it also crossed my mind, and made me wonder, could Ruthy love *me* like that? Like my mom loved my dad? Or was she trying to tell me, look Mayor, "Act I" was good, but now you have to come up with an "Act II" that's even better. Perform for me! Become something brilliant! Playing cards with you with the fire roaring away on a snowy night is JUST NOT ENOUGH! YOU ARE NOT ENOUGH.

"Look, come home, stay for a few weeks," my dad said into the silent phone. "And if you still want to go to Paris I'll help you go. But I need you to find out whatever it is your searching for before you run through my entire estate, okay?"

I laughed even though I tried not to. "Okay dad, I'll be home tomorrow night, I think. I'm flying stand by...."

Then an urgent thought came. It felt important to me: "Hey, dad?"

"Yeah."

"Can I say hi to Darcy? I kind of miss her. I haven't talked to her in so long."

"Darcy? Really? Sure, hold on!" He was very happy about this. He loved it when we got along well. It gave him a sense of pride.

There was some walking around, the sound of feet running quickly up the stairs, a knock on the door of the

pink room across the hall. Mumbles, some silent moments going by.

“Hey you!”

“Hi, Darce! How’s my baby sister?”

“Fine!” she chimed. She seemed very excited I wanted to touch in.

“How are *you*? Did things work out with Ruthy?”

“Kind of.”

“Oh?”

Darcy read between the lines. She was smart for someone who had just turned sixteen. She decided not to push any further. “Hey, I got my beginner’s license and I’m driving around in mom’s car during daylight hours!”

“Hey, welcome to the world of faster wheels! You’ve graduated from bicycle hell!”

“I still love to ride my bike. But, yeah, it’s fun. So are you coming home sometime?”

“Actually, tomorrow I think.”

“Really, wow! Because...” she stopped mid-sentence.

“Cause why?”

“Well, because I’ve missed you. You’re like my hero, you know!”

“Oh God, Darcy, don’t say that! I’m not a hero, not to anybody. Look to someone the next rung up, like a guy who didn’t pay his parking tickets.”

She laughed that sweet innocent laugh of hers, quiet, full and cheery. “You’re my fave. I can’t wait to see you, Mayo. Can I drive you to lunch or something one day?”

“Absolutely! That would be great. Just don’t wreck the car before I get there!”

“Roger that,” she said. I imagined her saluting like she used to do. Not a speck of defensiveness. No snide comeback like, “Well at least I don’t drive stark raving drunk at four a.m. like you used to do with your insane friends.” She would *never* say that. She was too cool. She loved me too much. I looked forward to spending some one-on-one time with her.

I got my wish. In spades.

Chapter 16

On this, my second solo air flight ever, the earth shrank quickly below me, and my life became small and still, floating thru marshmallow clouds. A perfect time for reverie. I took off my iPod headphones and leaned back in my seat with my eyes closed.

My father's words began to sink in a bit, but with a twist. I knew how dead life could be with the 'work, marriage, kids, grand-kids formula' that I so eloquently freaked out Ruthy and myself with. But...what if everything I presently wanted came true? What if I go to Paris, I have a great time by myself, I find out what I want to do for the rest of my life – open a French café? Invent cool new phone apps in French? ...Then I rush back to Connecticut, I whisk Ruthy away because, yes, she's changed her mind, drops out of school, and only wants to follow me wherever I go. 'Take me on an adventure,' she says smiling, as a big rainbow appears behind her. We sail into the open seas. We make love in every imaginable place on earth until we exhaust all the lust, wanderlust, anger, curiosity, passion, and the wildness of the world, and are left at last breathless and empty on some sunny beach in the South Pacific with girls in grass skirts asking us if we want another Piña Colada. And here's the point – I would be left right here, the same as I am now, not knowing what the crap any of this was for, or why I should care, or what I should do tomorrow. OMG!

I started talking to myself, like some kind of psychotic.

ME: *So let's get this straight, my mind is an endless vast expanse of meaninglessness, and unless that changes somehow, everything leads to nothing. Dead illusions? Nothingness? I am The Wandering Jester of Darkness?*

ME: *That sounds about right. Because, look, everyone gets it but you. You're so disconnected from everything. Your parents get it. Darcy, well, she lives it. Same with Ruth. Somehow they don't feel disconnected, they have some magic umbilical cord to...something, just as real and alive as you do.*

ME: *So what is life and death about then? What is love about? Permanent darkness after a random solitary flicker of light?*

ME: *You could see it that way.*

ME: *I do see it that way, obviously. That's the problem.*

ME: *Maybe how you see it is the problem.*

ME: *Well, I can't change the way I see it, now can I? It's just the way I see it, that's all.*

ME: *So then, why not just die and get it over with? Get to the finish line before it gets you?*

ME: *That's crazy. What the hell do you want me to do, shoot myself because I can't figure it out?*

ME: *You're not man enough to pull the trigger.*

ME: *What kind of thing is that to say? Are you insane?*

ME: *I don't know. Are you?*

ME: *I just want answers!*

ME: *From me?*

ME: *If you have anything to say.*

ME: *Not to you.*

ME: *Fuck you!*

ME: *Fuck you too!*

It was a very weird flight home.

Chapter 17

When I got to the house, the same house I grew up in a few miles from Venice Beach, there was a single light on. Oddly, the garage was open with no cars nestled inside. Mom and dad gone, separately? Darcy can't drive at night yet....

My neighbor greeted me at the door. I had known him since I was born. He started out married with kids too old for me to play with, and ended up divorced with his kids scattered all around the country working various jobs. Every Saturday he mows the lawn. That's usually the only time I see him. So this was a surprise. "Mayor, I've been expecting you."

"Hi Mr. Greenway."

His long wrinkled face darkened. "Mayor, there was an accident this afternoon."

"What?"

"It's Darcy."

"No! What? Is she okay?"

"I don't know, son. Borrow my car. Here are Map Quest directions I printed out to the hospital. I don't know anymore than I've told you. Your mom and dad are expecting you. You need to go now."

I hopped into his 1999 Beemer and blazed off. I was near tears. Starting to hyperventilate, driving too fast. What

if...don't go there. I tried cell phoning my dad and then my mom. No answer. Not a good sign. I pressed harder on the accelerator. My mind could think of nothing else but exits and stop lights and the double yellow lines before me. They were the enemy. I raced time to my destination.

When I blasted through the glass doors and got to the reception desk everything smelled nauseatingly antiseptic. Overhead fluorescents were bare-bulb bright. I was a bit jet-lagged from the flight, my eyes were blurring a bit, but then again, that might have been me holding back tears. "Not Darcy." That's all I could think, that's all I could say to myself.

"Darcy Allston's room please."

"And you are?"

"Her brother." I didn't say my first name, it was the cause of too many strange looks and unnecessary conversations, like – 'I'm Mayor Allston.' 'Mayor who?' Side look. "You're not a Mayor." Right. But...Gag line. On and on. Even in a hospital.

"The nurse was ruffling through a stack of papers. So many sick people. Names upon names.

"I'm sorry sir, she's in intensive care."

"I need to see her right now! I just flew in from Connecticut..."

"If you just take a seat right over there someone will be with you in a minute."

And then someone never comes. Yeah, that summed up this life just about perfectly. I wasn't about to do the good soldier thing, this was Darcy! I pretended to take a seat then took off down the hall as soon as the nurse-receptionist turned her back, asking the first guy in a green lab coat where the Intensive Care Unit was.

I told him I was just there and lost my way getting coffee. Oh yes, uh, down this hallway and then two lefts, and a right.

I ran down the corridors, past thick doors with small windows – signs for Kidney Dialysis and MRI scans. So many sick people.

I finally arrived at a door that said, "ICU." I looked in and saw a figure that looked like my dad walking across the room. I pressed a buzzer.

"Yes," said a nurse behind the window.

By now I had no more cool left. "Let me in! My sister's in there! Open the door!"

"Sir, you'll have to..."

The door opened. My dad pulled me inside, putting his finger to his mouth to signal for quiet.

"What's going on? How is she?"

"It's bad, son."

"Oh no, no, *no*. How bad?"

"We don't know yet. But your mom and I have been here since 11 o'clock this morning, what time is it?"

There was a clock right behind him. He was stone-cold out of it. "9:30 at night."

"Okay, look, if you can stay here I'm going to try to force your mom to get out of here for 30 minutes and get some food at the cafeteria and a breath of air. She's going under."

"Sure, of course."

I crept silently over to where my mom was sitting, at Darcy's bedside. Both of them were motionless.

My mom started crying, obviously not the first time today, it was like she had no tears left, just a quiet dry sobbing. She stood up wobbly legged and hugged me and wouldn't let me go.

My dad pulled her away and insisted she take a break. She pleaded, "I'm a mother. I don't take breaks."

But he was firm, "Sooner or later you need to refuel. You need to take care of yourself so you can take care of them."

I was aware he said, "Them." Maybe by habit. Or maybe before Darcy got hurt I was the one they considered to be in intensive care.

"Do it now while Mayor is here, Janey. He'll stay right with her."

She got up slowly. Her legs wobbled for a moment. She must have been sitting there for fourteen straight hours. "Look after my baby," she said to me, sobbing.

They left the room, rag tag, swirling in misery. I sat by Darcy's bed, partitioned off from the other injured, sick...some might be dying.

Darcy was sleeping, or in a coma, I couldn't tell. Her right leg was raised slightly, in a cast. Her ankle poked out of the bottom. It was dark blue and black and purple. Some kind of ice pack covered the other leg, which was swollen twice its normal size. She was hooked up to a machine measuring what I guess was her heartbeat. Her head was wrapped at the forehead in a bandage. Some of her long blonde hair escaped, waterfaling away from the pillow.

Her face was pale, angelic, expressionless. No expression of pain. Mouth slightly open. Almost as if expecting a kiss from God. Deep in sleep.

I remembered her, years past, she and I riding on a windy day down the Venice beach bike path at sunrise. It was a Saturday morning before anyone else was riding. The ocean spilled so loudly onto the beach we could hear it in rhythm along with the wind in our ears. Sun was rising bright red and orange and purple in the eastern sky, tinted through the fog-smog that coated the atmosphere. She looked over as she caught up with me, hair flying behind her, body strong and getting shapely at fourteen. Tan shorts, black Beatles tee-shirt untucked, billowing out behind her. Her smile was pure and golden. Her hair long and flying like a wispy flag, a part of her identity since she was a baby, long straight blonde hair, staying golden yellow through the years, and that big pure smile of hers. Her silver spoked wheels were spinning madly now, gleaming. I tried to leave her in the dust but she used every ounce of energy and

power she had to prevent it. Leaning forward, pedaling round and round at some superhuman speed, it seemed. And I couldn't leave her behind. She kept up. I high-fived her at about thirty miles an hour. Then we braked to a stop. And I opened my eyes. And she was here, still and silent before me.

All that power and glowing energy had been stolen from her. The usual spark of sunlight in her face was gone. Replaced by a cloud, a shadow.

I began to cry, one gasp at first, then silence. I don't cry. Then I caved in and began sobbing uncontrollably. My eyes just rained tears, curling across my face.

I leaned forward. "Darce, it's me, Mayor.... Sis, listen to me. I'm home now. You owe me lunch, remember? And, hey," I swallowed hard trying not to cry again, "remember the bike ride, remember, how you kept up with me that day? Remember how you pedaled faster than a pinwheel in a hurricane? Remember that? Well...you have to find that strength again now, Darce. Use it to get better. You have to fight! Fight for me, fight to keep up with me here, okay? Fight to come back to us.... Please." I cried until I was fever hot. I felt headachy and a little dizzy. Then it subsided, like a wave after crashing itself onto shore.

Another image came with my eyes closed now, it came reeling out in front of me like some movie playing, so clear: Thanksgiving dinner at our house. She must have been thirteen. We were just becoming friends. I mean, good friends. We were always civil to each other. Putting up with

her was easy to do because she'd do anything I said. And her clutching on to me all the time, wanting to do whatever I did. Go where I was going. Tomboy back then. But by thirteen, we could talk about almost anything together. School, and mom and dad, and a few weird uncles who were all downstairs at the moment scarfing the food mom made, pretending to fit in while stuffing themselves.

Everyone was there tonight. Turkey carved up, wine flowing. But I was in a funk. Just wanted to escape. Take off the stiff clothes I was forced to wear for the occasion. They were all staring at me with a sarcastic smile on their face. "Oh, how handsome you look!" said the aunts almost in unison. But I knew what they were really thinking: "Your parents finally got you to knuckle under and look normal, didn't they? Learn the lessons of respect and tradition, boy. It's about time." I hated them for that.

You noticed how pissed off I was. So you took my hand while they were all screaming over each other, barking out one stupid and trivial thing after another until nothing was left but noise, all drunk now, and you snuck me upstairs. You said you had something to show me. Some gift you were going to give me for Christmas but you couldn't wait.

You took me into your room and closed the door, laid down and stuck your hand under your bed until a wrapped present appeared. "Here it is," you said. Your eyes were sparkling with excitement. "Look!" you said. You couldn't stand it anymore. You unwrapped it for me, reverently but hurriedly, like it was the Holy Grail itself. Handed it to me. There it was, shining for you.

It was a glass ball with a beautiful girl inside of it standing in front of a castle. You shook it and snow came down and fell slowly on the entire scene.

I stared at it. It was supposed to be stupid for a boy my age to like something like that. Dumb. Child-like at best. Girl-ish at worst. But it got to me, somehow. You knew me too well. The girl in there, under the falling snow. It was the girl of my dreams, the girl you knew I wanted to find. That special someone. But it also looked a lot like you, Darcy! You wanted me to love you more, I guess. Or maybe it was you watching over me, even at thirteen.

I felt a pang of something odd shoot through me as I stared at the golden-haired girl in the globe. Almost a tear forming.

“So?” I said.

“You don’t like it? I can return it for something else!”

You held it out to me. Sweet hands cupping the glass. Holding it out to me like an ancient magical thing.

“Nah,” I said, transfixed, not blinking. “It’s kinda for girls.”

“Oh, okay.” You shrugged. I knew I hurt your feelings. But you showed not a hint of sadness or anger at me for waving away your gift. You loved me that much, didn’t you?

You put it aside and laughed at some piece of food that was stuck to my fancy shirt. A thick streak of gravy

surrounded it. "See, you found a way to be a slob and screw them no matter what they dressed you in!" she laughed.

"Yeah, cool, they can never get to me."

She nodded.

We started to talk about how much we hated these family events, and how everyone's breath smelled like wine and cigars, and how gross the turkey looked lying there on its back, dead, with its ribs showing, now that everyone had gorged their fill of it.

We put on some loud music and listened with our eyes closed until mom and dad came in and dragged us back downstairs. "Don't be rude, you two."

She kept the glass globe for herself. Put it on her dresser and kept it there ever since.

I opened my eyes.

"Hey, Darce, hey. I have a secret to tell you." I leaned closer to her sleeping face. "You don't tell Chris or Andre though, ever, promise? Okay. Listen, this is the truth, I loved the snow globe you gave me. I should have taken it. Remember? I should have recognized what was in there, how it moved me. How much you cared. You know me so well. But I couldn't let on."

Suddenly, she opened her eyes just a little! Slits at first, eyes rolling up a little as if she were still deep in sleep. "Mayo?" she whispered.

"Yeah, Darce, I'm here!" I moved the chair closer.

“Where’s mommy?”

Mommy? My God she hadn’t used the word ‘mommy’ since she was five years old.

“She’s here, Darce. Right downstairs. Back any second.”

“I, um, need...need some...water.”

“Okay, hold on.”

I raced around the partition to the nurse at the desk.
“My sister needs water, please.”

“Okay.” She never even looked up at me.

“I mean she just woke up from her coma and talked to me *and asked for water!*” It was the most miraculous thing that ever happened in my entire life! Didn’t she know that? How could she not care?

“The doctor will be here in a minute.”

“But she’s thirsty now!” I said getting agitated.

She turned to me. “Do you want to stay in here, sir? Because if you do, you need to keep your voice down.”

I saw a water fountain in the corner but no cups. I went over and cupped my hand with water from the fountain and rushed back to her.

“Darcy, the doctor will be here in a minute, but here, sip. Sip this from my hand.”

I put my hand gently up to her mouth and she suckled it like an infant. Most of it spilled on her white gown. "Mmm," she moaned. I had never felt anything so physically beautiful in my life, feeling her urgency for staying alive, and knowing I was helping her, just me.

She fell back underground, breathing easier now. I sighed a huge sigh of relief...but I knew she was still in extreme physical danger...Would she even remember I was here today? Would she make it?

I sat back and breathed a long sigh. This time the wildest thing happened. I began to pray. I had never done it. Not since I was six or seven anyway. I had no clue about what was going on "out there," beyond the night sky. Didn't trust the priests and the church, or the California gurus, or the LA philosopher-author-neighbors that lined my street, or any of the self-help books I had browsed through at airport news stands. They all seemed to know something I didn't, but I couldn't follow their path, because I couldn't honestly be sure what they said was true.

Either that, or somehow I knew that they didn't know anything! Just like me. So the only thing I was left with, and was truly comfortable with, was doubt.

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, my fingers were intertwined and glued together like the time I was hypnotized by a magician at Andre's twelfth birthday party. My teeth were clenched.

"Please God, whoever or whatever you are, if you have any care at all about this world, please let Darcy get better. She is who you want here...I would do anything. In fact, I

would switch places with her in a heartbeat, right now! Go ahead, make it happen! Let her be sitting here praying over me, instead of this...let me be the one to fight. Because it wouldn't matter if I win or lose. But she's too..." But then I suddenly realized that if we were switched, she would be asking God to do the same thing. She would ask to switch with me! And maybe that's what happened. He had listened to her instead of me, and that was supposed to be me lying there, and she had taken my place. I wouldn't put it past her to pull something like that off.

"Look, I am a nobody. I know that. I'm a piece of dust trapped in a sun beam. But I'm begging you...Remember when I was five and I asked you to prove yourself to me? I was drying off from a shower, in the bathroom next to Darcy's room, and I asked you to just move the toilet paper, rustle it, just a little, since there was no wind in there, it would have to be you! And I begged you to show me, and I asked you again and again to do just that one simple thing, to move the toilet paper with some magical isolated wisp of wind, or lift it up, defy gravity, or anything. And I sat on the side of the bathtub and focused on it and didn't blink or anything, I was dedicated to you in that moment, I didn't blink until my eyes were burning from the windless air, until finally, I gave up. I gave up and never asked you again. Remember?

"Well, this is different now. This is the moment you *have* to come through. This isn't a whim. This isn't for me. Not a game. She doesn't deserve to be lying there like this. She deserves to live. You have to help her. After all, if you're behind all destiny then this is your damn fault!" I started

sobbing again, feeling angry. My eyes were squinting from the anger.

Her breath was irregular. It scared me. I looked at the I.V.'s and the machine she was hooked up to. But I couldn't make any sense out of the patterns of white lines on the green screen.

I just lost it. I screamed loud inside my head, so loud my jaws felt like they would break under the pressure. "Why? Why choose the best person with the biggest heart? Don't you have any sense of rightness at all? Why would you do this to her and not me, or the millions of bastards out there who have no heart? And no brains? Why am I allowed to run free, completely ignoring every wondrous thing, calling you names, believing in nothing, doing nothing with my life? Why are you letting me spew my venomous crap all over people like Ruth, and even myself, and then taking the best person you've maybe ever made in all of time and cracking her ribs open like an egg? What's WRONG with you? Are you insane? Or maybe all you can do is explode things. Like some little kid. You explode the Big Bang, blow up everything into being, and then watch, like some clown without a remote, numbed out in front of a huge TV up there, is that it?

You don't make any decisions at all after the initial creation? It's just one big roll of the dice after that? Because if that's the case, I'll forgive you. You know not what you did.

But if you had anything to do with this, and you just let her die, I swear I'll get you for this. Somehow I will."

The anger burst into complete helplessness and craziness. I was crying so loud when the doctor came in he had to forcibly lead me out of the ICU altogether.

My mom and dad came back and saw me leaning against the wall outside of Intensive Care, hands locked around my legs, looking numb, staring at the floor trim across from me.

“Are you okay? Is Darcy...?”

“Same.” I choked on the word but knew I had to speak or my mom would have had a heart attack on the spot. “Doc’s in there with her.” I wiped my tears with the sleeve of my shirt.

They rushed right past me. Crazy kid in the hall.

I didn’t care if I was invisible to them now or not. Or if it seemed like I didn’t care. It was actually better that way.

I went back in after I composed myself. They tried to get me to leave the ICU around 1 a.m., but I refused. I laid on the cold floor using my black winter coat as a pillow and went to sleep next to her bed.

Chapter 18

A long two days came and went. I was virtually cryogenic. Frozen waiting. Then one morning it happened. She opened her eyes and saw me staring at her. She blinked. "Still here?" she whispered.

I smiled, "Darce?"

"Hey."

Her voice was deep and raspy. "Hey, what...what are you doing here?" She suddenly seemed disoriented, like she couldn't figure anything out.

"Somebody hit you on the freeway. Ran right over the yellow divider. Drunk I suppose, or texting."

She nodded. "Oh yeah," she whispered, breathing a deep breath out. "I remember now...I tried to move into the other lane but there was another car there and I didn't want to hurt them...." she tried to swallow but coughed instead. "Didn't want to hit anybody, so I..." her voice trailed off.

Then she swallowed again, and I told her to slow down and relax.

"Mayo," she said. "Thank you."

She tried to reach out to me, but the muscles in her hand and arm couldn't quite make it all the way. But I could tell what she was trying to do so I put my hand on hers. Her hand was icy cold, digits frozen there in place.

“Thanks for what?”

“For praying for me.”

I looked at her incredulously, “How did you know?”

“I heard you. I heard what you said. And you know what? It helped me. I pedaled my bike so hard to get better, you know? To get back to you.”

I was stunned. Had I been talking out loud the entire time?

I tried not to cry again, this time because I was so relieved she was okay. I looked at her I.V. “Does that thing hurt?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nothing hurts. Everything hurts.”

She tried to smile but the muscles around her mouth didn't quite go there.

“Darcy, I've made a decision, while sitting here next to you these three days. ...You know what?”

She looked at me peacefully.

“I'm going to stay home with you for the next few months and take care of you. I'm going to be your physical therapist, loyal slave, entertainment guide, D.J., and basically do anything you want me to do. I'll even listen to some of your girl-pop music.”

She coughed and shook uncomfortably. “Don't make me laugh.”

“Sorry. Really.”

I brushed my hand over her fingers. I massaged them gently. "Listen. I was going to go somewhere after seeing you and mom and dad. I was going to go to Paris for a few weeks to get my head together, again. You know? Again, and again? That's been me lately. But guess what? You woke me up. You are my 'somewhere'. I'm gonna spend time with you and get you better."

"Yay!" she said weakly. That's all she could say. But I could tell the thought of having me around was cheering her up.

"Listen, I'm going to let you sleep, but tell me one thing. Just one thing. This is kind of crazy, I know, but the doctor said you almost died on that first day. So, like, did you sense anything at all when you were out there at the edge...? Or, was it all just unconscious, or...all just darkness?"

"It was way better there than feeling all this pain!" she smiled. "But, no, it wasn't darkness at all. Something else."

"Something else?"

She nodded, "Something, don't know what."

I was quiet.

Then she fell back asleep.

"She's not out of the woods yet," cautioned the doctor. He had been standing right behind me for I don't know how long. "But you're doing good work with her."

I was embarrassed, but I thanked him. Then I fell back into the chair next to her bed and crashed until my parents

came back from lunch or dinner. Time was all a mess. Was it day or night? I hadn't looked out a window in days.

Chapter 19

Two weeks later Darcy was allowed to go home. We were all going home together.

I remember hitting the fresh air early in the morning, the sunlight, sparkling like an electric diamond, searing right through my eyes. I remember her trepidation about getting in the car. How would she navigate her still half-broken body into the back seat. And then not be scared when we drove on the freeway toward home. I remember holding her hand all the way. She kept her eyes closed the entire time.

I closed my eyes too. I thought back. I was sitting by her bed. She had become much more lively and responsive in that last week. So I began to talk about Ruth, and the pact we'd made. She listened but didn't say much. Then, not atypically, all the energy suddenly went out of her and I could tell she was about to go back to sleep. She grabbed my hand and whispered, "...Love you, Mayo."

"That's your territory. I have no idea what that means," I whispered back.

"What *what* means?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me what you mean!" She focused back into the present again.

"I mean, love.... I don't know...if I really cared about Ruthy I'd get a job and just marry her or something. So,

basically I suck.... My heart is closed to everything unless it hits me over the head. But you, Darce, *you* feel love all the time! For everyone. It's a part of your nature. It's in your face when you're asleep. Honestly. It's so easy for you. You say to me, 'love you, Mayo,' but what does that really mean? I honestly have no clue."

I thought I had been blabbing too long and that she had already begun falling back asleep. But she hadn't, she'd continued listening to every word.

"Are you asking me what 'I love you' means?"

"Yeah."

"I guess it means...whatever happens to you whenever you hear the sound of those words."

I didn't respond right away. I let her fall back asleep.

When I heard the words "I love you," and thought of Darcy, all the lights came on. Just like they did with Ruthy, most of the time. When I thought of some other people the lights came on steadily, but didn't blind me or anything. Some people say those words but they mean nothing at all to me, like a few of the aunts and uncles at Thanksgiving.

And some people hear those words spoken to them, even from people they care about, and feel nothing. I had been there too, living in that cold world.

Her eyes opened again a short time later. "I'm really feeling better, you know," she said.

“Well, good! I bet we’ll go home soon, and you’ll be back to your slobby pink room.”

She smiled at the thought.

“Wanna paint your pink room black instead? You could be so Goth.”

“Not this year,” she laughed.

“Darcy...they all expect something from me,” I whispered almost to myself. “But I’m just the same as I ever was. Not much good with fulfilling anyone’s expectations.”

She knew what I was talking about.

The accident, as fate would have it, deepened her. She had a natural wisdom now that used to just be kindness. It had grown through pain.

So after looking at me for a what seemed like a long time she said, “Mayor...*You...you* have always made me laugh and cry and inspired me...*with your words*. You have a unique way of seeing the world. Did you know that?”

“No!”

“Well, it’s true.”

Then she said, “I think you should write about the things you think about. Write about everything. You don’t have to do it from the chronological beginning. Do it from *your* beginning. Write about life as you know it – as you see it. Just start where you need to start and forget about time. Because...” It’s as if the words froze in the air.

“...What Darce?”

“Well, you asked me what I saw at the edge of life that day. Remember? Here is what I saw: Time is a fairytale. And anyone who fears it, or depends on it, or lives by it too strictly, well, they never really get to live.”

I nodded, wanting to hear more. I stared at her, lying there, still wired-up and slightly drugged. Was she hallucinating?

“See that journal over there?” She pointed to the night stand next to a vase of flowers and a glass of water. “Pick it up, go on.”

It was a blue book, I looked at it at first – all empty pages – so I started to hand it to her, but she waved me off.

“No, no. It’s yours. Take it...Find out.”

“Find out what? I don’t know if...”

“Hey, you owe me...you didn’t take the snow globe, remember? Take this, Mayor.”

For a second I thought she’d become delirious again, which had happened on some of the worst nights I was with her.

“The Thanksgiving snow globe,” she continued. “You turned it down. You wouldn’t take it.”

I closed my eyes. Had she heard what I said that first night?

“Don’t turn this other gift down. Just try it.”

“Okay.” I said it mostly to appease her.

She sighed a huge shaky sigh, moaned under her breath, and squiggled around slowly trying to get her body more comfortable.

“Give it to me for a second please, and pass me the pen, it’s there near the flowers.”

She took the book and the pen from me with great effort, since it felt heavy to hold in her hands, and on the front page she wrote in big shaky letters:

“somewhere beautiful”

She smiled, then closed her eyes. Her breathing leveled out.

She had stayed awake just long enough to change everything.

Chapter 20

I promised Darcy I wouldn't leave her until she could ride her bike with me on the bike path at Venice Beach.

As the time moved closer toward Christmas I thought about Ruth every day. Something exciting was crystallizing.

My parents saw a change in me. It gave me hope. My mom remarked to me one day, "You've grown a lot lately."

"Why?"

She raised her eyebrows, "You care." That's all she said.

I wrote in the blue journal that Darcy gave me every day. When I finished the last page I continued to write on my lap top. I had a plan. Crazy-assed as it was, it was all I could think of. It was the only thing that made sense.

Thanksgiving was typically insane. Everyone was so happy that Darcy was alive, and not going to be a cripple for the rest of her life, that all the neighbors as well as our nutty weird uncles and aunts, and all of our other relatives from out of town were coming. Three turkeys, five bowls of mashed potatoes, people everywhere, in every room in the house. Uncle Rusty dared to sing. Poor us. Again, I found myself after dinner in Darcy's room, hiding away from the madness, peaceful there, with the sanest person I knew.

Two weeks before Christmas, Darcy asked me to get the bikes out. It was time. She'd been walking since early

November, working with a physical therapist, and running every day at the gym since early December. She was getting back in shape after months of healing multiple broken bones, working her way back from unbearable pain.

We oiled the gears and put on our helmets.

Down the driveway we flew.

"Hey!" my mom called. *"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"*

Darcy waved back, *"See ya!"*

I can only imagine the joy and trepidation mom felt as we whirled away.

Chapter 21

The time whirled away as well. It was time to go.

I hugged Darcy goodbye. Before I left I told her, “Look, I’m not trying to mess with you, okay, because I’m your brother. But I just want to say that you are so beautiful, through and through. You’re an angel, actually. So when some boy comes along and tells you he think he knows you, and thinks he knows what you want, and you start to fall for him, remember this one thing for me, okay? Ask yourself, ‘Does he treat me as good as my big brother treats me? Does he love me that much?’ Because if the answer is no, he’s not the one. Got it? He’s just another lame dude who doesn’t have a clue how to be as cool as you are.”

“Mmm, hmm,” her eyes filled with tears. Then she smiled and said, “Roger that,” and gave me her mock salute.

I took a quick look around the house, gave everyone a hug goodbye, and was away, off to the cold mysterious land of Middletown, Connecticut. Land of my highest hopes, land of my worst fears. I would get to Wesleyan two days before Christmas break. Fate would lead the way from there.

Chapter 22

My third solo flight was not to Paris, France. And it wasn't so good, truth be told. Because I had a bad feeling about what would happen when we were finally face-to-face. So much had happened in the nearly two months since we'd last seen each other. Not a word was spoken between us. She could be living with Eric by now.... Or found someone else to take his place and mine. But I kept my eyes locked on my lap top. My fingers tapped away, not once stopping to look back at what I'd written. I just kept tapping, tapping, until both batteries were dead. We landed in a snow storm. Merry Christmas, east coast style.

The trees were barren now. No more rainbow leaves. No colors anywhere. Just outstretched branches looking dead and frozen, in a state of pleading.

The campus was bustling, but everyone seemed pretty nervous. Finals week. Nights awake. No-Doze, large coffees to go. Pizzas delivered to the dorm rooms for dinner.

I sat on a cold unwelcoming iron bench in front of the reception desk just inside the dorm where Ruth lived, waiting for her to come back from whatever class she had. I was freezing cold. Some of that chill was because I was nervous. I felt like curling up in a big fetal ball to keep warm, and to keep from flying off into space, wailing in some crazy space alien language, like the face in van Gogh's "The Scream." That about visually summed up what was inside me.

Every time the big glass door opened with girls covered head to toe with thick winter coats and hats and mittens I sat up straight, in case one of them was her. When the hall was empty again I fell back into “The Scream” state, hands hugging my knees together.

Then she appeared, preceded by some telepathic flash—I knew a second before the door opened this was the moment, but I didn’t have time to think about how strange it was that I knew. I stood up a moment before she entered so she could see me.

Anything could have happened then, like her being totally startled by my presence and saying:

1. *“Oh...hi. Wow. I didn’t expect you to be here...ever. Um...”*
2. *“Oh, Mayor. Hi. Remember Eric? ...Eric, Mayor!”*
3. *“Mayor? Damn, why did you come back? You’re still out to spoil everything in my life again, aren’t you?”*
4. *“Mayor? Wow! Um, listen: GET OUT!”*

She stopped in her tracks and smiled at me calmly. Her eyebrows lifted slightly in what looked to be a sympathetic response, “Hi, you! Hi!!! *I knew you’d come!*”

She hugged me until I stumbled and almost fell backward. Both of our clumsy thick coats combined to create a nine inch barrier between us. I was going to try to kiss her hello but there was too much distance between us, like trying to kiss a pregnant woman over her big stomach.

“Oh, wow, I’m a bit teary. Sorry. I just can’t believe you’re here. But I knew you’d come, I really did. ...I missed you so much!”

Okay, this was better than 1-4.

But what was I feeling? I was so cold. And I was so prepared for the worst I couldn’t take in all the surety she had.

“What unreal timing,” she said, out of breath, “I just finished my last final. Did you know that? How could you have known that?”

“Well, I got a job as a psychic at the San Francisco Thanksgiving Fair and they taught me a lot.”

“Uh huh, weirdo! So then you must know everything else that’s going on with me?”

I tensed up. “Not a clue.”

Weak smile. Begging her to cut the rope I was hanging from.

“I thought not. Well, we can’t go upstairs. Roommates. Where should we go?”

“I booked, The Inn.” It felt too forward. “But we could maybe go to the café?”

“Okay, let me go upstairs for a few minutes. I’ll be right back.” She didn’t kiss me as she slid into the open elevator.

A part of me still demanded that I brace myself. Be ready for anything, especially, “The Bomb.”

“The Bomb,” was something I had experienced all too often. Just when you’re a moment from victory someone lands a fifty footer at the buzzer. And there is jumping and screaming and celebration...shock. The other team is going wild, a moment they’ll never forget. And neither will you.... My second girlfriend, who I was delusional enough to think I liked, suddenly was dating the kid in my school that I hated the most. Swish, nothing but net....

Or you’re about to go to Paris and you find out there’s been a car crash, and someone you love is dying. And the fallout is radioactive.

So I have to stay on my guard. Watching the empty skies, listening carefully for the hum of enemy planes. Although sometimes they end up being allied planes. You just don’t realize that until years later.

Ruthy came bounding out of the elevator, grabbed my hand on the run, and raced me outside into the snow. We walked down High Street, with the sun still radiating a few final sparks of dim sunlight from its corner of the sky. Ruth stopped to pick up enough snow to make a snowball. She played with it and packed it nice and round as we walked. Then suddenly she threw it high up in the air with both hands. It came down and hit me squarely on the top of the head.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry!” She giggled.

“Lucky shot.”

“No way, I’ve been practicing with Muggsy Bogues for six weeks!”

Hopefully, that blast to the head was the last bomb of the evening. Wouldn’t that be nice?

Away we spun down the street feeling almost suspended in time. Life was ablaze, pulsing there right in front of our eyes. We were filled with the thrill and fear of the unknown.

I was about to make a left toward the café. But she tugged at me to make a right toward The Inn. The air got frostier as the sun disappeared below the city buildings. Stores were starting to close for the night. Lots of empty parking spaces on the snow white street. We reached The Inn, walked up the red carpeted steps and came to the same old room we knew, room 4.

She unbuttoned her big thick black coat, which looked kind of terrible on her. But find me any kind of pretty winter coat. I mean, they make everyone basically look like a bear.

She had on a soft yellow sweater, with a purple undershirt sticking out just a lick above the neckline. Ear rings, little green ones.

“Okay, tell me everything,” she breathed excitedly. She pulled me down to sit next to her at the edge of the bed. Really there was nowhere else to sit.

“It’ll take hours and hours. Longer actually. Please, you go first.”

She looked a little perplexed, maybe even a bit frustrated, but said, "Okay. Well, here's the abridged version, because adventurous it isn't—I've been studying. The end, mostly. Tests were hard, frankly. It surprised me. I hope I did okay on the finals. One of them was wicked. Bad. I went back home for Thanksgiving break. Thought about calling you, but didn't obviously. My parents have mellowed now that they see I'm firmly ensconced in school and straight as a well-aimed laser. They seemed relieved when I told them I wasn't seeing anyone and just wanted to concentrate on my studies. I should have been wearing big thick glasses and tied my hair in a bun to underscore my point, but they got it loud and clear. I'm no longer a hopeless trollop in their eyes. Then I came back here, went back to class.... Look, I'm not the story-teller, you are.

Then she added, "I kept wondering if you'd come. I kept trusting that you would. But I didn't know for sure. There was always that chance that all along you were just a flakeball...Or maybe you met someone."

She looked at me. "So your turn now."

"Okay, well first of all, I pretty much stayed in one place."

"Paris?"

"Didn't go."

She looked at me puzzled, "Did you stay home and get a job?"

"No, not exactly. But kind of."

“What does that mean?”

“I got a lot closer to my sister, actually, because...”

“That’s what you did for almost two whole months? You got closer to your...”

“Wait! That’s not what I meant to say.”

“Well, just say it then!”

“She was the only girl I was hanging out with, so you don’t have to think that.”

“But why?”

“Because, Ruthy, she almost died.”

“*What?* Darcy?”

I nodded. I wasn’t ready to tell her the details. I hadn’t talked about it with anyone actually. And didn’t really want to. But Ruth seemed concerned, so I told her about how I stayed in the hospital with her, and took care of her once she got back home. I told her how happy we were when we finally got to ride our bikes together again, although I knew Ruthy couldn’t have understood the full significance of that moment between us.

She listened the whole time in silence. Then the strangest thing happened.

She reached into the drawer and pulled out the old deck of cards that were still there. Strange. It was almost an afterthought. But it was perfect. We were decompressing. Trying to fill in the background of a new painting.

We sat on the bed cross-legged and played gin until it was time for dinner.

Chapter 23

The café was quiet on this night, since most of the student body was either studying for their last final, or packing up, checking their flights, and printing out their boarding tickets. We talked about little things. Teachers she had, good and bad. Interesting classes she took.

I told her about how nice it was, in retrospect, to be in warmer weather during the winter. And that I took long bike rides alone, and played some basketball at the high school courts in short sleeves. Didn't need to wear ice skates.

She looked at me and smiled, glad for me. Slowly we were connecting again, not with one wildly dramatic romantic moment, and not by fulfilling each other's expectations, but simply by being ourselves. We began to realize again what a natural fit we were just hanging out together. She thought I was funny, kind of cool, kind of a lovable odd ball. A rebel. But less strange to her in these moments now. Because I wasn't trying to be cool or an odd ball anymore. I wondered if she would be okay with that.

I looked at her face closely from time to time, trying to see her from a new perspective, and thought she was very pretty (which meant more than just "sexy.") I liked her face. It made me feel happy looking at her eyes. But I was also keeping my distance. She seemed more relieved than put off by it. I think she took it as a sign that I was here for her, not just for me.

We talked a little bit about my experience with Darcy when we got back, but I still didn't want to get into anything too heavy. It felt private. And I didn't want to use what happened between Darcy and me to get closer to Ruth. It felt dishonest. That's not the way I wanted it to happen.

Ruthy was okay with that. She also didn't push me about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. What the plan was.

When it was time for bed she stood in front of the roaring fire in our room and looked at her winter coat, as if she was choosing whether to go or stay. But I went over to the coat, took it in my right hand as if to hand it to her, and then tossed it in the corner with a bit of dramatic flair. That made her laugh.

When our skin finally touched I was pulled back out into the starry blue ocean with her. Time had stood still there since the last time; nothing had changed. Afterwards, she still didn't ask me anything. She knew I was different in some way, and was kind enough to just let me be.

Chapter 24

In the morning we took a walk back to her dorm. Tomorrow she would be flying home. She had packing and cleaning to do.

I spent my time walking around the campus, bundled up in Ruth's winter coat, which was a lot warmer than the one I'd brought. When I came upon the library I was curious to see if it was open. I mean, why would anyone want to be in a library after finals? I pulled on the door and it swung back. It was nearly deserted. I could smell the subtle scent of a thousand books.

I saw her at that table over there, at the beginning of the school year, with Eric breathing on her neck. I was standing right here when she came over to me. Then I found myself walking through the isles, looking carefully through the fiction section, leafing through many dozens of novels, seeing with newly opened eyes the amazing gifts that some of these authors possessed. The depth of their craft was revealed to me even by just leafing through a few pages, random lines, with sharply defined images, descriptions of a scene that came together like the subtle brush strokes of a master painting, a snow-covered valley, the opening of a rickety wooden door. A man drowning in an ocean of dreams.

I met Ruth back at the dorm at the prescribed time. I thought it might start to snow any minute. But even though

plenty of snow was on the ground the sky above stayed gray and held back. It wasn't ready.

Snowfall was now a festive thing to me. I wanted to see swirling flakes touch against her hair and cheeks and stay there a while, each happily existing as separate brilliant colorless crystals...then I wanted them to cover us both completely in a flurry of snow fur, and carry us into white-blinding thoughtlessness together, far away from this world.

I still wanted things like that. I still wanted to dream.

* * *

"I'm all set," she said. "Where'd you go?"

"I met some new friends."

"Who?"

"Well let's see, there was a guy named John Fowles, and another 'John' named Steinbeck. And Ken Kesey, and this really interesting kinda kooky girl named, Ursula LeGuin."

She shook her head, "Yeah, well, she's definitely the best sci-fi writer ever – 'The Lathe of Heaven'...and you're still a weirdo."

She took my hand and began to lead us back to The Inn so I could gather my things. It was time for one last talk. The one she wanted to have.

On the way we passed old red brick buildings, a church steeple, a book store awaiting new authors, a flower shop awaiting the last holiday shipment of mistletoe, a frame shop awaiting frameless paintings. A green road sign pointing the way to the town waterfall. With the air so cold and fresh, my mind was clear, ready. I decided not to wait. I didn't want to talk about my big plans in a small room. This seemed like the right moment.

"So, there's a lot left to tell you about my 'semester,'" I said. "My hardest semester."

My words were turning to mist in the frigid air, turning to smoke, then disappearing.

She waited for me to continue while we walked a bit slower.

"To get right to the point, with a very unpoetic lead up, I'm writing a book."

"A book? About what?"

"Actually, about all of this. Everything we're walking past, everything I'm thinking and feeling, since the day I met you. Before that isn't worth writing about."

"Us?"

"Well, that's some of it."

"Can I read it?"

"Not yet. Not until I come to the ending." We were only a block from The Inn now.

"Do you know what the ending will be?"

“No.”

I looked at her in an unusually intense way, realizing this was the moment, the first time I would have said this aloud to anyone: “And then, no matter what happens when I finish, I want to keep writing. Because, well, I think that’s what I’m supposed to do.”

She came closer and kissed me softly on the lips. We stood still for a moment; dusky gray air blurring the boundaries.

“And how do we fit in? You and me? Writers need a lot of private time, and lots of experiences and adventures out in the real world,” she said quietly.

“I came here for you, Ruthy. I want to watch you graduate. I can write from anywhere. I have plenty of ideas. Plenty to say. Summers we’ll be free to go places, and get a little crazy together, which is always a good thing, right? So I can travel then, if you...”

“Yes, yes, that sounds fine. Great!” she smiled and cupped my hands in hers.

She was thinking about saying more but decided not to. I could tell she was thinking about all the details that I never considered. I was a big picture dreamer. She was more practical.

So I added, “I’ll need work while I write to make some money, of course. So before you get all warm and gushy about this I want to put this image in front of your brain—I may come home one night with a clerk’s apron on after a long day of cashiering at the local drug store, looking like a

dork, with thoughts of dental floss and Pepto-Bismol flying through my head, while you come home from class with a stack of books under your arm....”

“And see if I fucking care,” she interrupted. She put her hand gently against my face and said, “You’re my guy.”

She looked straight into my eyes and started nodding, then I started nodding back, then we both began laughing, then we started running down the street toward The Inn holding hands, almost slipping on the thin ice as we ran, our laughter echoing, freaking out all the ghosts of Christmas past who were trudging down the empty street in the opposite direction, invisible. I held out my free hand, offering to help them, but they didn’t reach back.

The scene shifts to the beginning of the winter semester.

*We walk toward the library together on a magically cold day in
early January,*

the start of the new year.

*An image of Darcy’s beautiful girl in the snow globe is transposed
over the scene before us.*

Angel-white flakes of snow begin to fall, inside and out.

Epilogue

I have no idea what will happen with this book. Before I began writing it, in pen, in the journal Darcy gave to me, a working title had already been written for me on the first page.

I used to think that “somewhere beautiful” was a place on earth; or an everlasting moment of sensual beauty; a perfect kiss under the stars in a Paris garden. Most of the time, it was always *out there*, just out of reach. But now I know where it is. And I try to travel there more often.

If the only people who ever read this book all the way through to the end are Ruth and Darcy, that’s okay. There is something about the permanency of stories, no matter how few people read them – they don’t leave. They don’t die. I like that.

It’s not how things are in “the real world,” I know. Time drags us through our solitary path. Everything comes and goes. People and love leave us. Or we leave them. Death is waiting. It’s here in an instant. But those are no longer reasons to stop trying.

Most people think what I really want is to live my life in a fairytale. They scoff at that. On the other hand, I no longer believe all fairytales are lies.

But that’s another story for another time.

The End

- GM